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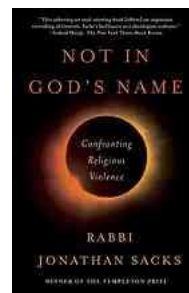
Book Review

Not In God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

New York: Schocken, 2015

N*ot in God's Name* is one of those must-read books for anyone interested in Interfaith dialogue. Rabbi Sacks served as the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013 and is a global religious leader and prolific author. He contends that religious extremism and violence committed in the name of God are a sacrilege and the ultimate misuse of religion for political ends. He opens the first chapter with the image of God weeping when religion turns men into murderers.



While he acknowledges casualties and perpetrators from all faith traditions, his primary focus is the sibling rivalries within the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Beginning with the Genesis story of Cain and Abel, he weaves a radical theme through the biblical stories of other relationships where “love” actually results in conflict: Abraham, with and between his two sons Ishmael and Isaac; Rebecca and Jacob; Rachel and Leah; Jacob and Esau; and later Joseph. I would add David and his brothers, his wives Michal and Bathsheba, and his son Absalom to this list. Sacks here shows that we cannot build a society on love alone – justice is required as well. Love is particular; justice is universal – God is universal as well as particular and can be found among “them” as well as “us.” God does not prove his love for some by hating others, and neither must we.

Given that Abraham is honoured as the common patriarch, Sacks asks what can explain the fraught relationship between the sibling faiths – crusades, jihads, forced conversions, inquisitions, burnings at the stake, pogroms, and suicidal terrorism – in religions dedicated to love, forgiveness, and compassion? He claims that Freud’s Oedipus complex theory of tension between fathers and sons is missing the key adjunct of fratricidal (we would say all-sibling) jealousy. He credits the French cultural anthropologist René Girard with the term *mimetic desire*: where children want what the other has, or even to *be* what the other *is*. Whereas in many species the drive for sibling dominance is part of the instinct for survival, this rivalry within the Abrahamic faiths is linked to the evolution of religious violence throughout the past millennium into the present.

This theme expands into a discussion of *pathological dualism*: the perception of various groups as either unimpeachably good or irredeemably bad. When one group views itself as victims, the “others” can be dehumanized and demonized, creating a category of scapegoats. Violence can be undertaken in perceived self-defence and killing a mutually hated outsider becomes a moral action. He further warns that the ever-escalating pace of change in our present world results in mass disorientation, with a sense of loss and fear that can rapidly turn to hate. The globalization of this paranoia and hate occurs at lightning speed through the internet and social media.

Sacks elaborates on a Jewish perspective on “love” from Moses’ injunction to the Israelites “not to hate an Egyptian because you were a stranger in his land.”¹ Jews are to remember Egypt every year at Passover, not to hate but as a reminder not to oppress or enslave others. To find the freedom in Passover, we must let go of any hate in our lives, both individually and collectively. He compares the directive of Jesus to “love your enemy” with Moses’ directive to “help your enemy, and his donkey” – action is specified. The Talmud further states that if your brother and your enemy both need help, you must help your enemy first.² Jewish law forbids taking vengeance or even holding a grudge. He recounts the story of a Hasidic Jew rescuing a Muslim at prayer in the 9/11 tragedy. And during the Paris attack on a Jewish supermarket in January 2015, a Muslim employee hid twenty Jewish customers in a refrigeration unit.

A quoted verse from the Qur’an explains how diversity gives colour and texture to our life on earth: “Oh mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other).”³ He reminds us that the dual covenant with God in Genesis demands this diversity: our common humanity as established in the covenant with Noah precedes our religious differences, stemming from the later covenant with Abraham (passed down through Isaac and Ishmael).

He also refers to various “hard texts” in all three Abrahamic faith scriptures which taken literally appear to promote the hate and religious violence we cannot sustain. Fundamentalism is dangerous, he maintains, and we must reinterpret these sacred texts, using both oral tradition and present scholarship for this purpose. Here and elsewhere throughout the book, I waited for a broader perspective that would include the wider spectrum of world faith traditions. His view that polytheism, with its vision of multiple forces and perennial conflict, is compatible with the sacralization of politics, and that monotheism is not, felt disturbing. His subsequent statement that “of course, religious history is rarely that simple” begs for further exposition beyond his summary of the kingdoms and political histories within the Abrahamic faiths.

Sacks outlines the values of Abrahamic monotheism that he believes are needed in our world. We should simply add that these values are shared by all faith traditions: the sanctity of life; the dignity of the individual; the twin imperatives of justice and compassion; the moral responsibility of the rich for the poor; the commands to love the neighbour and stranger; the insistence on peaceful modes of conflict resolution and respectful listening to the other side of a case; forgiving the injuries of the past and focusing instead on building a future in which the children of the world of all colours, faiths, and races can live together in grace and peace.

A number of inspirational reflections in his final chapter provide direction and hope for people of goodwill to stand together in creating a world where we can truly look through the eyes of the other. He says:

Hate harms the hated but destroys the hater. There is no exception.

¹ Deuteronomy 23:7.

² Baba Metzia 32b.

³ Qur’an 49:13.

We must train a generation of religious leaders and educators who embrace the world in its diversity, and sacred texts in their maximal generosity ... who do not teach children that non-believers are destined for hell.

Martyrdom means being willing to die for faith, not willing to kill for faith.

No soul was ever saved by hate. No truth was ever proved by violence. No redemption was ever brought by holy war. No religion won the admiration of the world by its capacity to inflict suffering on its enemies. Despite the fact that these things have been endorsed in their time by sincere religious believers, they are a travesty of faith, and until we learn this, religion will remain one of the great threats to peace in the world.

Today God is calling us ... to let go of hate, and the preaching of hate, and live at last as brothers and sisters, true to our faith, and a blessing to others regardless of their faith, honouring God's name by honouring his image, humankind.

Ken yehi ratzon – May it be so.

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