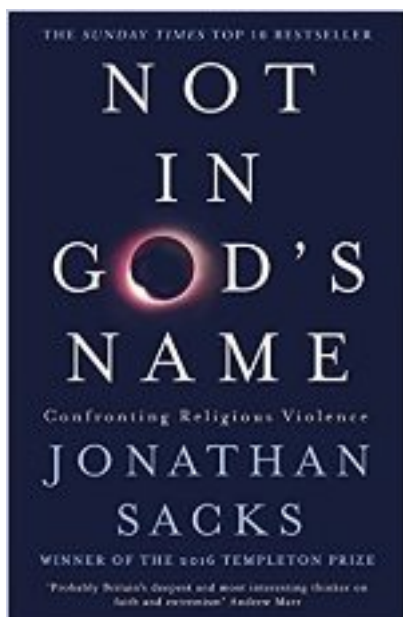


Not In God's Name

31/05/2017 | Ron Kronish

Jonathan Sacks: Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence. London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 2016. 320 pp. (cloth)



There is no question that Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the UK, is one of the most erudite writers on Jewish topics in the English language today. As a contemporary philosopher, his research and reading is widespread, as is his knowledge of classical Western and Jewish texts. In addition, he has been one of the leading orthodox rabbis in this generation who has devoted a good part of his rabbinate and his writings to interreligious relations, dialogue, and education, which is why his books are widely read among non-Jews as well as among Jews.

Therefore, when I was given his new book entitled NOT IN GOD'S NAME: Confronting Religious Violence a few months ago, I knew that I had to read it since it is one of the most important religious/philosophical books to appear recently. It is supremely relevant for our time since it deals with one of the most pressing religious/social/political/educational issues in our increasingly divisive world, namely, how are we to deal with violence that is inspired by "religious" leaders who claim to represent their religious traditions, which in fact, they distort their religions beyond belief and cause a lot of harm in our world.

At a recent conference in Seville, Spain, on this theme, I was "the rabbi" on the program since I replaced Rabbi Sacks, who apparently could not attend. Since I was the pinch-hitter, I began with a quote from his book:

If only we were to listen closely to the voice of the other, we would find that beneath the skin we are brothers and sisters, members of the human family under the parenthood of God. When others become brothers and conflict is transformed into conciliation, we have begun the journey to society – as-a-family — and the redemptive drama can begin."(p. 160).

Listening to the voice of the other is essentially what interreligious dialogue is all about. Not only is it based on the theological principle that all human beings are created in the image of God, but it has the goal of reconciliation, which transforms people who were in conflict into agents for social change, what we Jews call Tikkun Olam, Healing the World.

Rabbi Sacks demonstrates clearly that he has listened to the voices and especially the interpretations of leading Muslim and Christian theologians as well as to Jewish ones. This is one of the factors that make this book so special, especially for an orthodox rabbi. He actually pays attention to what Christian and Muslim philosophers and theologians have written throughout history and today, and he does this very carefully, consistently and creatively.

I have only one reservation with Rabbi Sachs' treatment of this subject. In many places, he criticizes the violent acts of radical fundamentalist Islamic leaders. But nowhere does he dare to criticize the violence acts of ultra "religious" nationalist Jews, especially in the West Bank, who engage in almost daily violence against Palestinians in the name of the same distortions of Judaism that extremist Muslim "theologians" do in twisting Islam completely out of shape so that it is unrecognizable to most Muslims, as interpreted by most Muslim religious leaders who are in fact not extremist nor radical.

He could have done this on several occasions in the book (but chose not to do so and I wonder why). For example, in his chapter on "The Stranger", he quotes some of the most famous passages from the book of Exodus and comments on them:

"Do not wrong or oppress the stranger, for you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21)

"Do not oppress a stranger, for you know what it feels like to be a stranger, for you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt."(Exodus 23:9)

Explicit in them (these commandments) is the radical idea that care for the stranger is why the Israelites had to experience exile and slavery before they could enter the Promised Land and build their own society and state. **You will not succeed in caring for the stranger, implies God, until you yourselves know in your very bones and sinews what it feels like to be a stranger.** (p. 184)

When I read this, I was immediately struck at how relevant this is to our situation in Israel today, and I was surprised that it was not mentioned. We are now in our own state. We are building our own society. But we are ignoring these commandments by not being kind to the strangers in our midst, not the Palestinian Arabs who live in the state of Israel and represent 20% of Israeli citizens, not the Palestinian Arabs who live in the West Bank and suffer abuse and mistreatment every day from settlers and from Israeli authorities, and not the 70,000 asylum seekers who have come to Israel as total strangers to try to live in dignity and most of who are being held in a horrible detention center in the desert.

Despite this major omission, this is a very important book. The writing is eloquent; the major thesis of the book is well constructed and well-developed; and the creative interpretations of classical Jewish texts, which are based on the author's re-reading of Biblical and Rabbinic sources, are

nothing short of uplifting and inspiring.

Most important for me is that the book ends with a clarion call to action which I totally support:

Now is the time for Jews, Christians and Muslims to say what they failed to say in the past: We are all children of Abraham. And whether we are Isaac or Ishmael, Jacob or Esau, Leah or Rachel, Joseph or his brothers, we are precious in the sight of God. We are blessed. And to be blessed, no one has to be cursed. God's love does not work that way.

Today God is calling us, Jew, Christian and Muslim, to let go of hate and the preaching of hate, and live at last as brothers and sisters, true to our faith and as a blessing to others regardless of their faith, honouring God's name by honouring his image, humankind. (p.267)

This message is a humanistic and universal one. It is very much needed in our troubled world today.

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