

Shalom all!

Currently, I am reading Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' latest book entitled, "NOT IN GOD'S NAME - Confronting Religious Violence". I am finding it informative, inspiring and very significant given the challenges of the violence we presently are facing in Israel and that of the rise of global Islamic militancy. So, today I would like to share with you a few of my thoughts and reactions in the context of the first chapter of Jonathan Sacks' book.

He opens with a quote by Blaise Pascal, "Men never do evil so completely and so cheerfully, as when they do it from religious conviction."

His opening sentence reads: "When religion turns men into murderers, God weeps!" We could discuss that sentence alone for hours, but I'll move on.

At some point of history both Christians, and Jews, to one degree or another, have blood on their hands in the name of religion. Today, however, in the form of Islam, we are experiencing an unprecedented global uprising of militant religion that deserves our attention.

Amongst many details researched and recorded of the growth and spread of this militancy, Rabbi Sacks refers to one seemingly small incident that made a great impact on me. In November 2010, a Christian woman in Pakistan - named Asia Noreen Bibi - was sentenced to death by hanging for violating Pakistan's blasphemy laws. What had she done? She was working in the fields together with Muslim farm workers. When she drank water from the drinking bowl, the Muslim workers protested that as a Christian she was unfit to touch and drink from the same bowl as they did. For that desecration she was sentenced to death and, at present - 5 years later - she is still being held in solitary confinement pending an appeal for her life.

What impacted me, as well as the tragedy of the story, was a biblical story that immediately came to mind - that of Ruth. Here we see a similar situation - a foreign woman working in the fields of Bethlehem among the local Jewish workers. She is shown compassion and appreciation and is welcomed and invited to eat and drink with them. From that encounter came King David and the Messiah Redeemer of Israel and the world. What does this teach us of the heart of God? How deeply we can understand why He weeps when violence is perpetrated in His Name.

Let's take a closer look at this violence.

While Christians and Jews *are* the targets of radical Islam it emerges that the majority of victims of Islamist violence are other Muslims. 60% of fatalities have occurred in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan - all of which have Muslim majorities.

A tragic example, in Pakistan again, occurred on 15 December, 2014, when Taliban gunmen stormed a school that included Western style subjects in its curriculum and murdered 141 people, 132 of whom were children! In their targeting of children, and women, and their means of execution - such as beheadings and keeping girls in cages, using them as sex slaves or burying them alive - the lack of conscience in these terrorists is staggering. Their attacks are carried out with the cry 'Allah u'Achbar' God is great! But how do they justify evil in the name of their god?

As Sacks points out:

"Killing the weak, the innocent and the very young and old is evil. Indiscriminate murder by terrorist attack or suicide bombing is evil. Murdering people because of their religion, or race, or nationality is evil."

Religious fanatics are willing to sacrifice their lives and the lives of other people in what they consider a great or holy cause. They see themselves as doing "God's work" and seem happy doing it. However, the so-called "dreams of Paradise" in reality are "nightmares of Hell! "

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The issue of the connection between religion and violence has been much studied in recent years. Rabbi Sacks reports that three conclusions have emerged.

First, that religion is the major source of violence; therefore, if we seek a more peaceful world, religion should be abolished.

Second, religion is *not* a source of violence. Religion teaches us to love and forgive and not to hate and fight. People are made violent by fear, seeking glory, or the perpetual desire for power!

Third, People say that, "Their religion is for violence, ours is for peace."

Sacks then posits that none of these are true!

Regarding the first: In the *Encyclopaedia of Wars* , of the 1,800 conflicts listed less than 10% involved religion at all.

He sees the second as misguided. When militants declare a "holy war - a *jihad*" and define their battle as one against Satan, condemn unbelievers to death, and murder in cold blood while declaring "God is great!", to deny they have religious motives is absurd.

He calls the third a classic in-group bias, where "we" are always right and "they" are always wrong. Groups, like individuals, have a need for self-esteem and they will interpret facts to confirm their sense of superiority.

So, we may ask, what *is* true for us today?

Let us take a look at things from the perspective of modern history.

The awful extremes of the 2nd World War rocked the world and the booming of the economy and materialism, along with the freedom of individuals to live as they chose, saw the wane of religion in the West. The hymn of this new dispensation was John Lennon's "Imagine", with its vision of a post-ideological, post-religious world, with 'Nothing to kill or die for.' A sweet thought, perhaps, but the re-emergence of religion in the form of militant Islam has caught the West unprotected and unprepared because it has been in the grip of "The American Dream" that rejected God, the Bible and prayer and, in one form or another, is in the grip of idolatry.

The sad result is a culture without meaning; one in search of self-adulation and pleasure. A kind of 'La-la Land', which one fears - unless there is a great awakening to the reality of the Presence of the God of Israel and the truth of His Word, will simply crumble and be overtaken by the onslaught of evil in the form of aggressive, radical Islam. War is being waged against the West and its freedoms and it seems that the West does not yet fully understand the power of the forces that oppose it, nor what is required to stand against it.

How then do we respond?

Thinking people who publicly stand up and use words, written or spoken, against the evils, face violent reactions from the Islamists; illustrating that in our global and technological age, speech is no longer free.

Sacks comments: *Weapons win wars, but it takes ideas to win the peace.*

In the case of the 17th Century Reformation the transformative ideas emerged from outstanding thinkers such as John Milton, Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza and John Locke. Not all these were religious. Hobbes and Spinoza were both considered atheists in their time. Milton was a great Christian poet and Locke also was a Christian. Nonetheless, all four drew their political ideas primarily from the Hebrew Bible.

The 17th century, with its stand against the corruptions of the Catholic Church and the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, which made possible the distribution of the Scriptures and other material to the common man, ultimately resulted in the dawn of an age of secularisation.

Sacks considers that: "The 21st Century will be the start of an age of de-secularisation." The world is changing faster than at any other time in history. Change disorients and it can lead to a sense of loss and fear that can rapidly turn into hate. Our world is awash with hate. The Internet, along with its many blessings, if abused can spread hate, violence and fear globally." And instantly!

He adds, "What printing was to the Reformation, the Internet is to radical, political Islam - turning it into a global force capable of inciting terror and winning recruits throughout the world. Religious radicals use the new electronic media with great sophistication. Events that would in the past have had a purely local impact now

send shock waves around the world. Never has paranoia been easier to create and communicate. One can present any twisted agenda if you are communicating with people thousands of miles away who have no means of checking the facts.”

Please understand that I have great respect for Rabbi Sacks and his work but I cannot agree with one crucial point that he makes in this book. He appeals to us, “As Jews, Christians and Muslims”, with the assumption that we are serving the same God of Abraham. That the god of Islam is also the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Allah, however, is the god instituted by Mohammed. Any study of the foundation of Islam and the character of this false prophet, clearly reveals that by no stretch of the imagination can Allah be Abba, our Father in Heaven - the God of Israel and the Bible.

Those who perhaps hold to faith in the God of our father Abraham must perforce progress to the understanding that He also is the God of Isaac and Israel.

Our joy is that we can rest assured that His Word - the Word of Life and Grace and Truth - from Genesis to Revelation - will triumph in the end over the lies of death and destruction. In the words of Abraham Joshua Herschel:

“The Bible is mankind’s greatest privilege.

No other book so loves and respects the life of man.

Nowhere has man’s need for guidance and the certainty of his ultimate redemption been so keenly conceived.

It has words that startle the guilty and the promise that upholds the forlorn.

...It is a map of time from Creation to Redemption.”

As we look with hope to the glorious final Redemption with the coming of our Messiah and King may we faithfully walk in its paths, guided by Him who loves us.

Shalom Shalom from Keren in Jerusalem.