



Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence

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*****2015 National Jewish Book Award Winner*****

In this powerful and timely book, one of the most admired and authoritative religious leaders of our time tackles the phenomenon of religious extremism and violence committed in the name of God. If religion is perceived as being part of the problem, Rabbi Sacks argues, then it must also form part of the solution. When religion becomes a zero-sum conceit—that is, my religion is the only right path to God, therefore your religion is by definition wrong—and individuals are motivated by what Rabbi Sacks calls “altruistic evil,” violence between peoples of different beliefs appears to be the only natural outcome.

But through an exploration of the roots of violence and its relationship to religion, and employing groundbreaking biblical analysis and interpretation, Rabbi Sacks shows that religiously inspired violence has as its source misreadings of biblical texts at the heart of all three Abrahamic faiths. By looking anew at the book of Genesis, with its foundational stories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Rabbi Sacks offers a radical rereading of many of the Bible’s seminal stories of sibling rivalry: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Rachel and Leah.

“Abraham himself,” writes Rabbi Sacks, “sought to be a blessing to others regardless of their faith. That idea, ignored for many of the intervening centuries, remains the simplest definition of Abrahamic faith. It is not our task to conquer or convert the world or enforce uniformity of belief. It is our task to be a blessing to the world. The use of religion for political ends is not righteousness but idolatry . . . To invoke God to justify violence against the innocent is not an act of sanctity but of sacrilege.” Here is an eloquent call for people of goodwill from all faiths and none to stand together, confront the religious extremism that threatens to destroy us, and declare: Not in God’s Name.

Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence Details

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From Reader Review Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence for online ebook

Terry Earley says

This is a very important book for religious people. There is a constant, popular drumbeat declaring with loud authority, that religion is the source of the worst violence today and throughout history.

I know this is nonsense repeated by those who, for their own reasons, are antagonistic to religion, but Sacks describes the realities with such clarity, it was refreshing to read. In addition to thoughtful answers to this question, I got a nice course of study in the Old Testament patriarchs and matriarchs.

Sacks clarifies that God loves all of his children, regardless of their frailties and faults. He works with us all. Israel is not a "master Race", but a "Covenant Race". There is a very important difference in that.

Jsavett1 says

Jonathan Sacks is one of the most inspiring and important religious thinkers of our time. Thankfully, he's incredibly prolific. This book is Sacks's response to the new atheists (Hitchens, Harris and company) who claim religion is responsible for all the evil in society, but especially the violence and religiously branded war with which we currently contend.

I don't want to give too much of Sacks's argument away because much of the joy in this book comes by way of discovery. It's a deep Jewish goal and honor to offer a "hiddush," roughly "new" or "novel" interpretation of a religious text. Sacks delivers here in ways that had me in awe.

He spends the first part of the book identifying what he believes are the causes of human violence. He calls two of these tendencies "pathological dualism" and "mimetic desire." In layman's terms, the former is seeing the world in binary terms--black and white, good and evil, the children of light v. the children of darkness, and the latter is the desire to BE or TAKE THE PLACE OF one's neighbor or sibling. He spends a lot more time explaining how these work than I have room to here.

Sacks doesn't run from examples of these characteristics in Jewish texts and tradition. Rather, he points out example after example of the most famous occasions of sibling rivalry, dualism, and mimesis: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Hagar and Sarah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. In EVERY CASE, as I was saying before, Sacks manages to argue PRETTY PERSUASIVELY that the Torah does not say what we think it says about these stories. He suggests we're RIGHT to empathize with Hagar and Ishmael, with Esau over Jacob. Furthermore, through his novel interpretations, he suggests that the Torah can serve as a manual for COMBATTING dualism and religious violence. We just need to read with subtlety and nuance and care. As always, Sacks offers a compelling case for continuing to study traditional religious texts and hold them in high regard. Indeed, in a wonderful example of intertextuality, in Thank You For Being Late, which I'm reading simultaneously, Tom Friedman quotes Sacks and discusses his beliefs as a way of "surviving" and "adapting" to the tumult of the "age of accelerations" in which we live.

To this end, in one of the sections I enjoyed most because I happen to agree with it, Sacks discusses the importance of the interpretative traditions in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He argues that these traditions are ESSENTIAL, not just clever apologetics added later by religious leaders. Sacks holds that "Fundamentalism is text without context and application without interpretation" and that such an approach is,

CONTRARY TO THE BELIEFS OF THOSE WHO ESPOUSE IT "NOT FAITH BUT AN ABERRATION OF FAITH."

We are lucky to have Rabbi Sacks in our world. He's incredibly learned. He's incredibly compassionate. He's incredibly brave. In full disclosure as a reviewer's note, I came to this book already not believing that religion is the cause of war and violence in a simplistic way. As Sacks also points out---I believe that disaffection usually begins with economics, psychology, and politics...this disaffection then often takes on the language of religious struggle because it so powerfully appeals to dualism and mimesis. In other words, certain interpretations of certain religions become commonplace in certain times for certain reasons. I don't believe there's anything endemic to religion or to a particular religion which skews it toward violence. To think otherwise is to ignore history, the violent passages in one's own tradition, and the experiments in the 20th century with totalitarian non-religious regimes. I say all of this only to tell the reader that I enjoyed this book partially because it didn't ALSO have to convince me of its thesis. I could sit back and enjoy Rabbi Sacks's genius at work. So should you.

Carla H. says

I may be the last of my friends to read this book, but if you haven't, I highly recommend it. From the first line, "When religion turns men into murderers, God weeps.", to the final mandate "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 a blessing to others regardless of their faith, honoring God's name by honoring his image, humankind.", I found myself saying 'yes, yes, yes.' If I were still preaching, you can be sure you would hear these words from the text, "too often in the history of religion, people have killed in the name of the God of life, waged war in the name of the God of peace, hated in the name of the God of love and practiced cruelty in the name of the God of compassion." I have wept every time I've read these words. Again, I highly recommend this book.

John Forman says

This may be one of the most powerful books I have read in the past decade, and I hope and pray that it receives an enormous readership. One reviewer thought that Rabbi Sacks may be "preaching to the choir" and not reaching those who perpetrate religious violence. I see the concern, especially given the events of the past week, but I don't share it. Rabbi Sacks' work in this book is truly prophetic in the tradition of prophets of biblical times, who were not predictors of the future, but rather inspired voices calling people to repentance and justice. They reminded the people of God's amazing and steadfast faithfulness, as Rabbi Sacks does here. They offered not despair, but hope and a reminder of right relationship with G*d, by whatever name we choose to use for the Divine. If religion is to live into its potential as the source of hope, love and justice, then especially the children of Abraham--teachers, leaders, clergy and lay people--would do well to get re-inspired by this masterwork from a brilliant soul. Pick up this book, read it, and remember or learn how to put love into action for justice, instead of retribution or despair.

M. Fatih Yegul says

A wonderful response to the violence stemming from religions. Author, starting with the story of Cain and

Abel, provides a context based on Jewish scriptures that sibling rivalry is not and should not be the destiny of the humanity. With fitting references to Christianity and Islam, author calls the children of Abraham to create a world, where we can live together with our differences. World definitely needs more of these voices.

Paul says

Not in God's Name – An Interesting Opening to a debate

Former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has just published one of the most pertinent books about religious extremism that should be the beginning of a debate on religious violence. This is a well researched well written start to a debate that needs to be taken about how we can understand radical politicised religious violence. While not coming up with a complete answer what Jonathan Sacks is doing is inviting us to think about how we can end radical politicised religious violence.

At present there is a whole slew of books that have been published on religious violence mainly from a Christian standpoint looking at Islamic violence this is a wonderful complimentary book to that canon and vital at the same time.

Sacks open the book looking at a definition of evil and reminding us that Judaism, Islam and Christianity are the three Abrahamic faiths, religious cousins. There is an interesting debate about the sociology of the Abrahamic faiths, the history, philosophy, and psychological insight into relationships which includes a sort of sibling rivalry, rejection, where all three see themselves as victims, scapegoats, and the need to search for reconciliation.

In the final chapter Sacks addresses his specific remedies to religious violence which are aimed specifically towards the Abrahamic faiths. At least unlike politicians and so called media experts and commentators, who will disagree with Sacks ideas, there is no flailing around looking for an answer. Sacks also points out that have a vested interest in the problem of violence are actually part of the problem.

In God's Name does not offer a cure but it certainly offers a diagnosis and that the current pace of religious violence offers those opposed to religions to state their case even more at the moment. What Sacks does say that one of the things religions can do is learn to honour God's name and be more like his likeness may help to solve the problems that arise from religions.

Those who are not active in any faith will point out the many points that they will not agree with but this book is not designed for a non-believer it is written for those who have a faith and want to understand religious violence.

Those with a faith will receive this book and its teaching and wisdom with an open mind while those commentators who do not, will continue flail around and come up with nothing.

Robert says

Not in God's Name

The subject book, written by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in 2015, addresses the phenomenon of religious

extremism in the 21st century. “Abraham himself,” writes Rabbi Sacks, “sought to be a blessing to others regardless of their faith. The idea, ignored for many of the intervening centuries, remains the simplest definition of Abrahamic faith. It is not our task to conquer or convert the world or enforce uniformity of belief . . . To invoke God to justify violence against the innocent is not an act of sanctity but of sacrilege.”

For an understanding of the rise of radical Islam, I recommend the reading of Sacks’ book.

Religion has returned in force across many parts of the world because “it’s hard to live without meaning . . . the great modern substitutes for religion – the nation, the race and political ideology – are no less likely to offer human sacrifices to their surrogate deities . . . The religion that has returned is religion at its most adversarial and aggressive, prepared to do battle with the enemies of the Lord, bring the apocalypse, end the reign of decadence and win the final victory for God, truth and submission to the divine will.”

Ms. Murabit, a Canadian born, Libyan trained doctor, on January 3, 2016, said, “After the revolution, people claimed Islam as the reason to oppress women. That wasn’t religion. It was a manipulation of faith . . . Using God is a very easy way to manipulate society.” She cautions against radicalization and the murder and chaos it engenders.

However, the Internet is an incredible tool to spread radical political Islam, turning it into a global force capable of inciting terror and winning recruits throughout the world.

“Religion performed, and continues to perform, a task fundamental to large groups. It links people, emotionally, behaviorally, intellectually, and spiritually, into communion and thus community.” It can be a force for good or a force for evil as evidenced by the rise of radical Islam.

Meanwhile the energy of the secularized West “has been sapped by the decay of the very things religion once energized: marriage, families, communities, a shared moral code, the ability to defer the gratification of instinct, the covenant that linked rich and poor in a bond of mutual responsibility, and a vision of the universe that gave rise to the social virtue of hope.” The so-called American Dream once tapped into this notion of hope, but it does so by exalting personal sacrifice in the quest for success – of the individual or of the small company.

“At the heart of the three faiths is the idea that within humanity there is one privileged position – favored son, chosen people, guardian of the truth, gatekeeper of salvation – for which more than one candidate competes. The result is conflict of the most existential kind, for what is at stake is the most precious gift of all: God’s paternal love. One group’s victory means another’s defeat, and since this is a humiliation, a dethronement, it leads to revenge. So the strife is perpetuated . . . Each defines and defends itself by negating the others.”

A radical thinker looks at the three religions today and “decides that the religious establishment is corrupt. In his eyes it has made its peace with the world, compromised its ideals and failed to live up to the pristine demands of the faith . . . [With an Internet age], suddenly the radicals command the heights and address the masses, while the religious establishment is left flat-footed and outpaced and looking old.”

“Living traditions constantly reinterpret their canonical texts. That is what makes fundamentalism – text without interpretation – an act of violence against tradition. In fact, fundamentalists and today’s atheists share the same approach to texts. They read them directly and literally, ignoring the single most important fact about a sacred text, namely that its meaning is not self-evident. It has a history and an authority of its own. Every religion must guard against a literal reading of its hard texts if it is not to show that it has learned nothing from history.” Note that the sacred literatures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all contain passages that, read literally, are capable of leading to violence and hate.

“If two professing Christians, one Protestant, the other Catholic, could not resolve their disagreements without anathemas, excommunications and violence, then religion could not become the basis of a sustainable social order.” President Abraham Lincoln noted such religious infighting as he thought about the American experience and his country’s separation of Church and State. Eventually, Western Christianity would learn what the Jews had been forced to discover in antiquity: how to survive without power.

History shows us that “it took the spectacle of Jew against Jew, Christian against Christian, to bring about the change . . . That is what is happening within Islam today. The primary victims of Islamist violence are Muslims themselves, across the dividing lines of Sunni and Shia, modernist and neo-traditionalist, moderate against radical, and sometimes simply sect against sect . . . Violence is what happens when you try to resolve a religious dispute by means of power. It cannot be done. You cannot impose truth by force. That is why religion and power are two separate enterprises that must never be confused.”

Can the world be changed? Yes! “And the proof is one of the most uplifting stories in the religious history of humankind: the changed relationship between Jews and Christians after the Holocaust.”

Find out how radical Islam can be stopped in its tracks.

Mary Shelton says

One of my top three favorite books this year. I wish communities could read it in mixed-tradition groups--like the interfaith groups that once discussed the book of Genesis, or before that (and on a completely different plane), Constantine's Sword. On the other hand, maybe with a book like Not In God's Name, it's best to read a chapter at a time and think about it privately, without the urge to tell others what we're thinking. I say that because it's emotionally and spiritually dense, and I think that if I were discussing it in a group, I'd be tempted to use the occasion to assert my religious and political identity.

The title refers to sectarian violence and hate, but it's more than that. It's about conflict between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but it's also about conflict within Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities. (Our Jewish community has a little conflict. If your religious community doesn't have any conflict, maybe your family has conflict. If not, then this might not be your book.) Identity-based conflict is an important idea in this book, along with what Rabbi Sacks calls "pathological duality" (the unwillingness to accept that people can be both good and bad, not either/or). He also talks about sibling rivalry (over a parent's love or God's love). But if this were just about ideas like that, it wouldn't be that different from other books about God and conflict. What made it interesting was the textual interpretation, where he linked passages in different places to unlock the meaning: "Genesis was about the birth of a covenantal family. Exodus is about the birth of a covenantal nation: ...[N]ot until families can live in peace can a nation live in peace."

Alicia Joy says

I really enjoyed the middle chapters where the author analyzed religious texts. Very interesting. However, I picked up this book with the idea that it would be about religiously driven terrorism. The author did not discuss the Quar'an or Islam or religious extremism directly. He talks primarily about Jewish beliefs and texts. Very disappointing and I am not sure I agree with a good chunk of what he said, though it may be

because he is. it very good at developing an argument. However, he is quite good at beating a dead horse. Maybe worth the read, it definitely gave me some good ideas, but it was a little painful to get through.

Leah says

I originally picked up this book only because I am generally a fan of Rabbi Sacks' writing. The question of "why does religion cause violence" has never really interested me, because I've read enough history to know it's a false premise. Nevertheless, I've read almost everything else Rabbi Sacks has written, so I figured I would give this book a try.

Well, it turns out that Rabbi Sacks, too, knows some history, and does away pretty quickly with the concept that religion is the source of all violence; his central question is, "Why is religion the main source of violence NOW," which turns out to be a much more interesting question with a much more interesting answer.

That question, and his answers, take up the first part of book; this is the section I think would be of interest to almost anyone interested in current events. The rest of the book attempts to find a solution to the problem, and to ground/read this solution in the Biblical text through some extremely interesting interpretation. I didn't find this part as convincing as the first -- I would say it was 90% convincing to me, personally -- but 90% is pretty good when it comes to discussions of this nature. It was definitely fascinating and thought-provoking throughout -- even if I hadn't been convinced at all, I wouldn't have been sorry to have explored these ideas.

Toward the end of the book, Rabbi Sacks attempts to chart a vision for a future where religion will no longer be the cause of violence, but a solution toward it. I found this part overly optimistic as a solution to the issues our world is facing today. But it did lay out a legitimate and compelling framework for a worldview in which such a thing could, in theory, be possible.

Jessica says

This was an incredibly insightful book by an amazingly well-read scholar. I thoroughly enjoyed learning about different ways to read and understand some of the most troubling stories from the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. I also appreciated that someone, rather than insisting that religion causes violence, proposed an alternative that actually makes sense, while still addressing the fact that some people do feel justified in committing horrible crimes in the name of God. I came away feeling educated and maybe a little uplifted; certainly motivated to share what I've learned.

Betty says

Many thanks to Edelweiss, Net Galley and Schocken for providing me an advance copy of this book for an honest review. I have already placed a pre-order for it.

This book addresses the issue of those who perform violent acts in the name of God. Rabbi Sacks defines "altruistic evil" as those acts so heinous that they cannot be defended or justified as the means to a great, noble or holy end. Much of the book looks at the connection between religion and violence. The role social media plays in the perpetuation of violent ideology is discussed.

Rabbi Sacks explains the concept of dualism and how it establishes the feeling of Us versus Them. It is suggested that “dualism becomes lethal when a group of people, a nation or a faith, feel endangered by internal conflict”. This Us versus Them can easily lead to the dehumanization which destroys empathy and sympathy. He proposes that through role reversal – always placing ourselves in the shoes of Them – can help us prevent dehumanizing others. He makes a good argument, in my opinion, of how this led to the Crusades, the Holocaust, Kosovo, Hutus vs Tutsis, and now al-Qaeda and ISIS. Since he believes that the Holocaust illustrates the psychological and social dynamics of hatred, the Holocaust is addressed extensively.

Anyone familiar with the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) knows that much of the violence centered around sibling rivalry. Several chapters explore the stories of Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob, Rachel and Leah. I found this section especially enlightening as Rabbi Sacks digs deeper into the stories and presents a totally different reason for these stories than we have all been taught. I spent quite some time thinking about his interpretations. And I know I will continue to think about them.

Jews are continually reminded that we are to be kind to the stranger because we were once a stranger in another land. This teaching has a much more profound meaning than I thought before I read this book.

Anyone interested in exploring the role of religion in violence and who is willing to broaden their thinking on stories they have been taught their entire life should definitely read this book. I will be keeping it with me and re-reading portions frequently as I continue to mull over what is written.

John says

This is a really excellent book, and an easy read for anyone interested in the issues. The first half is a helpful and informed survey of what I regard as some of the most useful psycho-social authors on the analysis of today's epidemic of religiously-motivated violence around the world. It is eloquent, non-partisan and accurate. The second half of the book gives a theological exploration of a non-fundamentalist approach to the Abrahamic faiths and their relevance to this issue. Written as it is by the UK's immediate past Chief Rabbi, I found it a profound and very readable exposition - indeed I told my wife, Joan, that I doubted that I had ever heard such an in-depth biblical exposition from a Presbyterian pulpit. I downloaded the book after participating in a House of Lords debate where the author, Rabbi, the Lord Sacks, was also a speaker. I had been impressed by his speech, and by a review of the book in the current issue of *The House* - the weekly journal of the Westminster Parliament. I am very glad that I did. It is a long time since I found a book so 'un-put-down-able' or gave five stars in a review, but this book hit all the buttons for me.

Bar Reads says

"not in god's name: confronting religious violence / Jonathan sacks explores the roots of religious violence, & how misinterpreting text & having a dualistic, fundamentalist view, contributes to hate & ultimately turns to violence.

Sacks talks about all forms of terrorism.

& I, personally, as a Jew, am appalled when I see things about Jewish terrorism and I speak out against it, but I also want to be able to talk about all forms of terrorism, without being called a xenophobe.

The regressive left with the social justice warriors are killing free speech in the name of political correctness,

but I won't shut up when it comes to bad ideas, like raping women and slaughtering infidels. Lets talk about bad ideas, but at the same time, spread a word of tolerance and peace.

In the beginning, the book has a few chapters that I would categorize as social science & history, It's followed by a few chapters that explore the biblical text, showing that "genesis" is written like a proper book-with a narrative and character progression. It's one of the deepest, most profound reads I've ever had.

We are drawn in multiple examples to the other, the outsider, the underdog, the stranger, and Rabbi Sacks reminds us of the well known saying: "you were once strangers in a strange land"

Quote:

"At the core of the bible's value system is that cultures, like individuals, are judged by their willingness to extend care beyond the boundary of family, tribe, ethnicity and nation."

It shows how characters are not close to perfect; they are profoundly flawed and morally grey. This is put in the book for us to see that humanity is capable of both good and bad, and that redemption is possible.

It also shows how dangerous thinking: I'm good, they're bad is. Quote:

"Pathological dualism does three things:

It makes you dehumanize

and demonize your enemies.

It leads you to see yourself as a victim.

And it allows you to commit altruistic evil,

killing in the name of the god of life,

hating in the name of the god of love,

and practicing cruelty in the

name of the god of compassion."

On fundamentalism:

"Never say, I hate, I kill, because my religion says so.

Every text needs interpretation.

Every interpretation needs wisdom.

Every wisdom needs careful negotiation

between the timeless and time.

Fundamentalism reads text as if

god were as simple as we are.

That is unlikely to be true"

This is not an easy read.

that being said, it is a very profound read, I have tweeted quotes from this book more than any other book I've read,

I've loved it, & I really want it to be translated to Hebrew, so I could buy it to everyone.

4.6 stars

Steve says

NOT IN GOD'S NAME is one of the most profound books I have ever read. Jonathan Sacks provides an incisive analysis of the roots of religious violence and hopeful direction on the way that humanity may move forward in dealing with it. As recent events in France have demonstrated, none of us are immune or protected against the possibility of religious violence. This makes this book relevant to every one of us. Sacks asks in which direction we want to go — the will to power or the will to life? While Sacks is clearly passionate about this global problem, he writes with extraordinary depth and objectivity with a simple power that is difficult to ignore. Sacks calls all people — and particularly those of the Abrahamic religions — to let go of hate and the grasping for power. As Sacks so eloquently observes, *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 greatest threats to the peace of the world.* NOT IN GOD'S NAME is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand religious violence (better called “altruistic evil”) — and more importantly, what we can do about it.
