

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Rabbi: 'Confronting Violence in the Name of God'

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We are confronted daily with violence all around the world. It seems like it is the only topic the media finds worthy of reporting.

But worse than that, it seems like violence is the only thing the consuming public finds of interest. As if violence in the news were not enough, consider the violence on television, movies and video games. We even pay money to be confronted by violence in these various forms.

On the world scene, it seems so much of the violence takes on a religious nature. But is it really the case that religion is the source of such violence?



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Lord Jonathan Sacks, the previous chief rabbi for Great Britain, recently gave a lecture at Kings College-London, where he currently serves as professor of law, ethics and the Bible, titled "Confronting Violence in the Name of God."

He points out modern science shows that, while we pass on our genes as individuals, we survive as groups. But while groups unite us with kin, groups also divide us into the "we" and the "them."

As our communities became larger and beyond the ability to personally identify with each

member, religion provided a common story and history that allowed larger groupings with which one could identify. Thus, Sacks suggests, it is a group identity that is behind the competition and potential violence, not the religion itself. This can be seen as well within larger religious groups where the particular national or historical groupings divide into separate communities.

Rabbi Sacks argues, however, there is a particular "occupational hazard" of monotheism — namely, dualism — claiming there is not one ultimate reality, but two: good and evil. It divides people into the "saved and the damned, the children of light and the children of darkness." In this

way, it dehumanizes the opponents and, as such, they do not deserve to live. Furthermore, it sees the in-group as victims and the out-group as the oppressors or perpetrators. It can lead to what he calls "altruistic evil," the sense of doing right in selfless acts, while in fact doing evil.

In previous centuries, secularization, modernity and the rise of the nation-state enabled a decline in the vicious religious wars of Europe, but the current situation moves in an opposite direction. Particularly in the Middle East, it is the discontent with secularization, individualism and materialism and the imposed nation-states that is the problem. While in modernity, religion became less important,

today, religion is on the rise throughout most of the world. Hence, argues Rabbi Sacks, the response to religious violence must be a religious response. We must learn to see the image of God in the face of the stranger and the enemy. We must affirm monotheism over dualism. We need to listen again to the voice of God as refracted through our scriptures.

We must again discover what unites all religions: love of God and love of neighbor and stranger. Otherwise, in destroying our enemies, we will destroy ourselves.

The full video of Rabbi Sacks lecture can be accessed at bit.ly/rabbi-sacks.

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