



# CNI

---

## **Comment - No society can survive without religion or a substitute for religion**

**Religion will always return because it is hard to live without meaning, writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

Much has been said and written in recent years about the connection between religion and violence. Three answers have emerged.

The first: Religion is the major source of violence. Therefore if we seek a more peaceful world we should abolish religion.

The second: Religion is not a source of violence. People are made violent, as Hobbes said, by fear, glory and the “perpetual and restless desire for power after power that ceaseth only in death”. Religion has nothing to do with it. It may be used by manipulative leaders to motivate people to wage wars precisely because it

inspires people to heroic acts of self-sacrifice, but religion itself teaches us to love and forgive, not to hate and fight.

The third answer is: Their religion, yes; our religion, no. We are for peace. They are for war.

None of these is true. As for the first, Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod surveyed 1,800 conflicts in the Encyclopedia of Wars and found that less than 10% involved religion at all. A 'God and War' survey commissioned by the BBC found that religion played some part in 40% of conflicts but usually a minor one.

The second answer is misguided. When terrorist or military groups invoke holy war, define their battle as a struggle against Satan, condemn unbelievers to death and commit murder while declaring 'God is great', to deny that they are acting on religious motives is absurd. Religions seek peace, but on their own terms. This is not a recipe for peace but for war.

### **Superior to others**

The third is a classic instance of in-group bias. Almost invariably people regard their group as superior to others. Henry Tajfel, one of the pioneers of social identity theory, showed how deeply this runs in even the most trivial of

groupings. In one experiment he divided people into groups on the basis of the mere toss of a coin, yet they still rated the members of their own group as more likeable than the others, despite the fact that they had never met one another before and knew that they had been selected on a purely random basis. Groups, like individuals, have a need for self-esteem and they will interpret facts to confirm their sense of superiority. Judaism, Christianity and Islam define themselves as religions of peace yet they have all given rise to violence at some points in their history.

## **Concern**

My concern in this book is less the general connection between religion and violence than the specific challenge of politicised religious extremism in the twenty-first century.

The re-emergence of religion as a global force caught the West unprotected and unprepared because it was in the grip of a narrative that told a quite different story.

It is said that 1989, the year of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, marked the final act of an extended drama in which first religion, then political ideology, died after a prolonged period in intensive care. The

age of the true believer, religious or secular, was over.

In its place had come the market economy and the liberal democratic state, in which the individual and his or her right to live as they chose took priority over all creeds and codes. The hymn of the new dispensation was John Lennon's Imagine, with its vision of a universe with:

*Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too.  
Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace.*

It was the last chapter of a story that began in the 17th Century, the last great age of wars of religion. The West had undergone a process of secularisation that had taken four centuries.

First, in the 17th Century, came the secularisation of knowledge in the form of science and philosophy. Then in the 18th Century came the secularisation of power by way of the American and French Revolutions and the separation – radical in France, less doctrinaire in the United States – of Church and state. In the 19th Century came the secularisation of culture as art galleries and

museums were seen as alternatives to churches as places in which to encounter the sublime.

Finally in the 1960s came the secularisation of morality, by the adoption of a principle first propounded by John Stuart Mill a century earlier – namely that the only ground on which anyone, including the state, was justified in intervening in behaviour done in private was the prevention of harm to others. This was the beginning of the end of traditional codes of ethics, to be replaced by the unfettered sanctity of the individual, autonomy, rights and choice.

By the late 20th Century most secularists had come to the conclusion that religion, if not refuted, had at least been rendered redundant. We no longer need the Bible to explain the universe. Instead we have science. We do not need sacred ritual to control human destiny. In its place we have technology. When we are ill, we do not need prayer. We have doctors, medicine and surgery. If we are depressed there is an alternative to religious consolation: antidepressant drugs. When we feel overwhelmed by guilt, we can choose psychotherapy in place of the confessional.

For seekers of transcendence there are rock concerts and sports matches. As for human

mortality, the best thing to do, as the advice columns tell us, is not to think about it too often. People may be uncertain about the existence of God, but are reasonably sure that if we don't bother him, he won't bother us.

What the secularists forgot is that Homo sapiens is the meaning-seeking animal. If there is one thing the great institutions of the modern world do not do, it is to provide meaning.

Science tells us how but not why. Technology gives us power but cannot guide us as to how to use that power. The market gives us choices but leaves us uninstructed as to how to make those choices. The liberal democratic state gives us freedom to live as we choose but on principle refuses to guide us as to how to choose.

Science, technology, the free market and the liberal democratic state have enabled us to reach unprecedented achievements in knowledge, freedom, life expectancy and affluence. They are among the greatest achievements of human civilisation and are to be defended and cherished. But they do not and cannot answer the three questions every reflective individual will ask at some time in his or her life: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?

These are questions to which the answer is prescriptive not descriptive, substantive not procedural. The result is that the twenty-first century has left us with a maximum of choice and a minimum of meaning.

Religion has returned because it is hard to live without meaning.

That is why no society has survived for long without either a religion or a substitute for religion. The twentieth century showed, brutally and definitively, that the great modern substitutes for religion – the nation, the race and the political ideology – are no less likely to offer human sacrifices to their surrogate deities.

The religion that has returned is not the gentle, quietist, eirenic and ecumenical form that, in the West, we had increasingly come to expect. Instead it 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.

Not all anti-modern religion is violent. To the contrary, highly religious Jews (Haredim) are usually quietist, as are Christian groups like the

Mennonites and the Amish, and Muslim groups like the Sufis. What they seek is simply the opportunity to live apart from the world, construct communities in the light of their values, and come close to God in mind and soul. In their different ways they are testaments to grace.

Undeniably, though, the greatest threat to freedom in the postmodern world is radical, politicised religion. It is the face of altruistic evil in our time.

*Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is a former Chief Rabbi of Britain. This is an extract from his latest book Not in God's Name – Confronting Religious Violence published by Hodder & Stoughton £20.00 (approximately €27.67).*