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Swords Into Plowshares

Islamic State's creed embodies evil in the name of a sacred cause. To defeat it, we must recover the values that can bring Jews, Christians and Muslims together.

by Jonathan Sacks

The West was caught unprepared by the rise of Islamic State, as it was a decade and a half ago by the attacks of al Qaeda and as the Soviet Union was by the determination of the mujahedeen of Afghanistan in the 1980s. These are among the worst failures of political intelligence in modern times, and the consequences have been disastrous.

The unpreparedness was not accidental. It happened because of a blind spot in the secular mind: the inability to see the elemental, world-shaking power of religion when hijacked by politics. Ever since the rise of modern science, intellectuals have been convinced that faith is in intensive care, about to die or at least rendered harmless by exclusion from the public square.

But not all regions of the world have gone through this process. Not all religions have allowed themselves to be excluded from the public square. And when secular revolutions fail, we should know by now that we can expect religious counterrevolutions.

Religion has lately demanded our attention not as a still, small voice but as a whirlwind. If Isaiah's prophecy that nations "shall beat their swords into plowshares" is to be fulfilled, then the essential task now is to think through the connection between religion and violence.

Three answers have emerged in recent years. 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. 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: Their religion, yes; our religion, no. We are for peace. They are for war.



During his recent visit to the U.S., Pope Francis sits with Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, left, and Iman Khalid Latif, right, during an interfaith ceremony at the National September 11 Memorial and Museum, Sept. 25, New York City. Photo: Ray Stubblebine-Pool/Getty Images

None of these is true. As for the first, Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod surveyed 1,800 conflicts for their “Encyclopedia of Wars” and found that less than 10% involved religion. A [“God and War” audit](#) commissioned by the BBC found that religion played some part in 40% of major wars over the past three millennia, 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 that “God is great,” it is absurd to deny that they are acting on religious motives. Religions seek peace, but on their own terms.

The third is a classic instance of in-group bias. 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 initiated violence at some points in their history.

My concern here is less the general connection between religion and violence than the specific challenge of politicized religious extremism in the 21st 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 individuals and their right to live as they chose took priority over all creeds and codes. It was the last chapter of a story that began in the 17th century, the last great age of wars of religion.

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 refuses, on principle, 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 civilization and are to be defended and cherished.

But they do not answer the three questions that 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? The result is that the 21st 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 20th century showed, brutally and definitively, that the great modern substitutes for religion—nation, race, political ideology—are no less likely to offer human sacrifices to their surrogate deities.

The religion that has returned is not the gentle, quietist and ecumenical form that we in the West have increasingly come to expect. Instead it is religion at its most adversarial and aggressive. It is the greatest threat to freedom in the postmodern world. It is the face of what I call “altruistic evil” in our time: evil committed in a sacred cause, in the name of high ideals.

The 21st century will be more religious than the 20th for several reasons. First is that, in many ways, religion is better adapted to a world of global instantaneous communication than are nation states and existing political institutions.

Second is the failure of Western societies after World War II to address the most fundamental of human needs: the search for identity. The world's great faiths offer meaning, direction, a code of conduct and a set of rules for the moral and spiritual life in ways that the free-market, liberal democratic West does not.

The third reason has to do with demography. World-wide, the most religious groups have the highest birthrates. Over the next half-century, as Eric Kaufmann has documented in his book "Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?", there will be a massive transformation in the religious makeup of much of the world, with Europe leading the way. With the sole exception of the U.S., the West is failing to heed the Darwinian imperative of passing on its genes to the next generation.

This leaves us little choice but to re-examine the theology that leads to violent conflict in the first place. If we do not do the theological work, we will face a continuation of the terror that has marked our century thus far, for it has no other natural end.

The challenge is not only to Islam but also to Judaism and Christianity. None of the great religions can say, in unflinching self-knowledge, "Our hands never shed innocent blood."

As Jews, Christians and Muslims, we have to be prepared to ask the most uncomfortable questions. Does the God of Abraham want his disciples to kill for his sake? Does he demand human sacrifice? Does he rejoice in holy war? Does he want us to hate our enemies and terrorize unbelievers? Have we read our sacred texts correctly? What is God saying to us, here, now? We are not prophets but we are their heirs, and we are not bereft of guidance on these fateful issues.

As one who values market economics and liberal democratic politics, I fear that the West doesn't fully understand the power of the forces that oppose it. Passions are at play that run deeper and stronger than any calculation of interests. Reason alone will not win this battle. Nor will invocations of words like "freedom" and "democracy." To some, they sound like compelling ideals, but to others, they are the problem against which they are fighting, not the solution they embrace.

Today Jews, Christians and Muslims must stand together, in defense of humanity, the sanctity of life, religious freedom and the honor of God himself. The real clash of the 21st century will not be between civilizations or religions but within them. It will be between those who accept and those who reject the separation of religion and power.

What then should we do? We must put the same long-term planning into strengthening religious freedom as was put into the spread of religious extremism. The proponents of radical Islam have worked for decades to marginalize the more open, gracious, intellectual and mystical traditions that in the past were the source of Islam's greatness.

It has been a strategy remarkable for its long time-horizon, precision, patience and dedication. If moderation and religious freedom are to prevail, they will require no less. We must train a generation of religious leaders and educators who embrace the world in its diversity and sacred texts in their maximal generosity.

There must be an international campaign against the teaching and preaching of hate. Education in many Islamic countries remains a disgrace. If children continue to be taught that nonbelievers are destined for hell and that Christians and Jews are the greater and lesser Satan, if radio, television, websites and social media pour out a nonstop stream of paranoia and incitement, then Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with its commitment to religious freedom, will mean nothing. All the military interventions in the world will not stop the violence.

We need to recover the absolute values that make Abrahamic monotheism the humanizing force it has been at its best: the sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual, the twin imperatives of justice and compassion, the insistence on peaceful modes of resolving conflicts, forgiveness for the injuries of the past and devotion to a future in which all the children of the world can live together in grace and peace.

These are the ideals on which Jews, Christians and Muslims can converge, widening their embrace to include those of other faiths and none. This does not mean that human nature will change, or that politics will cease to be an arena of conflict. All it means is that politics will remain politics and not become religion.

We also need to insist on the simplest moral principle of all: the principle of reciprocal altruism, otherwise known as tit-for-tat. This says: As you behave to others, so will others behave to you. If you seek respect, you must give respect. If you ask for tolerance, you must demonstrate tolerance. If you wish not to be offended, then you must make sure you do not offend.

Wars are won by weapons, but it takes ideas to win a peace. To be a child of Abraham is to learn to respect the other children of Abraham even if their way is not ours, their covenant not ours, their understanding of God different from ours. Our common humanity must precede our religious differences.

Yes, there are passages in the sacred scriptures of each of the Abrahamic monotheisms that, interpreted literally, can lead to hatred, cruelty and war. But Judaism, Christianity and Islam all contain interpretive traditions that in the past have read them in the larger context of coexistence, respect for difference and the pursuit of peace, and can do so today. Fundamentalism—text without context, and application without interpretation—is not faith but an aberration of faith.

With the rise of radical political Islam, our world has become suddenly dangerous not only to Jews, Christians and others but to Muslims who find themselves on the wrong side of the Sunni-Shiite divide. There will be military and political responses, but there must also be a religious one, or the others will fail.

We must raise a generation of young Jews, Christians, Muslims and others to know that it is not piety but sacrilege to kill in the name of the God of life, hate in the name of the God of love, wage war in the name of the God of peace, and practice cruelty in the name of the God of compassion.

Now is the time for us to say what we have failed to say in the past: We are all the children of Abraham. 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. God is calling us to let go of hate and the preaching of hate, and to 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.

Lord Sacks is the former chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth. This essay is adapted from his new book, "Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence," which will be published by Schocken on Oct. 13.

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