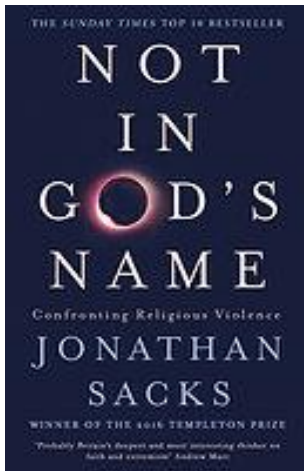


Jonathan Sacks: Not in God's Name



Jonathan Sacks is, by any standard, a 'heavy-weight' of theological learning but he is a gifted communicator and engaging story-teller, and he carries the reader easily through some complicated terrain, making this large tome a manageable read.

He introduces the faith of Abraham as an attempt to be a blessing to others, standing in contrast to its contemporary religions which sought their own power and glory. It is from Abraham that we get the 'golden rule': at first be nice - then reciprocate in kind! But also the attempt to find a solution to the tit-for-tat violence that dominated traditional societies with the concept of the scapegoat on whom all one's vengeful anger can be borne without being passed on.

Sacks moves on to consider the contentious notion of being a 'Chosen People'. The early stories of the scriptures are about God choosing the weak and inadequate, rather than those who are already strong and noble. Jacob displays 'mimetic desire' towards Esau - wishing he had his brother's gifts and talents, but the 'blessing' is to be people and land rather than any personal qualities or strength; and Jacob has to learn to be content with who God has made him in himself. There is no sense that those not 'chosen' are somehow therefore cursed: Esau is quite an attractive character.

The Chosen Family then completely falls apart and Sacks notes that whereas it takes God three chapters of Genesis to create the universe it takes 47 more to sort out family relationships, which then become the basis of the new particular ethic of the people of Israel. And it is within this ethic that the scriptures are to be read and understood. He boldly asserts that to translate the Bible literally is to tell a lie and dismisses fundamentalism for assuming that God must be as simple as we are. Understanding scripture is a process within a tradition.

He deals directly with the problem of violence, declaring it to be a human failure rather than a religious imperative and pleads for a way to manage our differences rather than seek a homogenous religious landscape. He condemns the apocalyptic instinct as a loss of patience with the process of history, a consequence of prophecy abandoning hope, asserting that the only way to be free of perpetuating historical hatreds is through a commitment to forgiveness - whether this is received or not.

Sacks ends by reminding us that we are trustees rather than owners of our faith and we must engage with it with loyalty, humility and responsibility.

This important book is full of hard-won wisdom and gentle humour for our complex times.