

A Morning with Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Rabbi Lord Sacks, “Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence”

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<http://rap.wustl.edu/video/a-morning-with-rabbi-lord-jonathan-sacks/>

Marie Griffith

Good morning. We have a full program, so I think we’ll go ahead and get started. It is truly an honor to welcome all of you here today to break bread with us and to learn from an incomparable leader in our own time, Rabbi Lord Sacks. I’m Marie Griffith, I’m the director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, which serves as an open venue for fostering rigorous scholarship and informing the public about the intersections of religion and politics in our time and throughout our history. Our benefactor and namesake, Senator John C. Danforth, is also present with us today, seated over here, and it is always a privilege to welcome him back to Washington university. Thank you, Senator, for being here with us. In this particular case, it’s especially a privilege because it was Senator Danforth’s original idea for our center to bring Rabbi Sacks here to St. Louis and to the Washington University Campus, so we must gratefully credit him for that.

Fortunately, many others in St. Louis also had the same idea and also wanted to bring Rabbi Sacks to St. Louis for his first visit to St. Louis, and so the center is very pleased to have been able to collaborate with several other organizations to bring Rabbi Sacks here. These organizations include the Jewish Federation of St. Louis, whose CEO, Andrew Rehfeld is also with us today, the St. Louis Jewish Book Festival, the St. Louis Jewish Community Center, WU Hillel, and Chabad at WU. Many, many staff members at all of these organizations have worked very hard to make this visit happen, and I am grateful to you all for your tireless efforts in making it a success. I do especially want to express gratitude to Andrew Rehfeld and Joan Wichansky from the Jewish Federation, and from our own office I want to thank Debra Kennard and Sheri Pena for their characteristically outstanding work. Thank you. Finally, I want also to welcome today at the very outset, Lady Elaine Sacks, seated here, who I am certain is a crucial help to the Rabbi’s own work in ways that we cannot even imagine. I also want to welcome the host for the Sacks family in St. Louis, Heschel and Idina Raskes. Idina is cooking for tonight’s dinner and will be present at today’s lunch, so she is not here in body but she is very much here in spirit, we welcome you both, and the Sacks’ assistant, Joanna BenRosh, without whom I’m sure much would not be possible in this visit. And to all of you here, faculty and friends, thank you for joining us on this wonderful occasion.

Now, without further delay, I am most gratified to introduce our esteemed guest, Rabbi Lord Sacks, a man whom Senator Danforth last evening called a “personal hero,” whose influence on the Senator’s own thinking about religion and politics is unsurpassed. Rabbi Sacks is well-known to all of us as a global religious leader both within and beyond the international Jewish community, and one of the most significant moral voices of our time. Best known for serving as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth from 1991-2013, he currently serves as the Ingeborg and Ira Rennert Global Distinguished Professor of

Judaic Thought at New York University and the Kressel and Ephrat Family University Professor of Jewish Thought at Yeshiva University. He is also professor of law, ethics, and the Bible at King's College, London. He has served as a visiting professor of religious studies, theology, and philosophy at too many universities to name here. Perhaps one day Washington University will have the great fortune to be added to that list. We will work on that. His secular academic work in England up through the PhD he earned in 1981 focused on moral science and moral philosophy, helping to prepare him for his extraordinary vocation. Rabbi Sacks has been internationally renowned for contributions to diasporic Jewish life and interreligious work, holding 16 honorary degrees thus far and earning awards throughout the world, including the Canterbury Medal from the Beckett Fund for Religious Liberty in New York for his role in the defense of religious liberty in the public square. In 2005 he was knighted by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and was seated in the British House of Lords in 2009. Rabbi Sacks has authored 25 books aimed at both scholarly and non-scholarly public audiences, including *The Dignity of Difference*, which received the Grawemeyer Prize for Religion in 2004, and *The Great Partnership: God, Science, and the Search for Meaning*. His latest book is the one we are discussing today that just came out from the American press, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, and here he speaks of countless manifestations of what he has called "the issue of our time," while arguing that our common humanity precedes religious differences and thus offers us a solution to the problems that lead to violence between religious groups and violence within religious groups as well.

Last evening many of us were fortunate enough to hear Rabbi Sacks speak to the virus of anti-Semitism as a symptom of a much larger problem—violence between religious groups and the all-too-frequent assumption that each religious group must separately fight against its own haters, rather than joining in a collective movement against hatred and religious phobias of all kinds. Today he will speak to us further about these critical issues for about a half hour, after which we will have another half hour for a Q and A and a vigorous discussion with him. Please join me now in welcoming Rabbi Sacks.

Rabbi Sacks

Marie, friends, thank you so much for this wonderful gathering, for this lovely breakfast, in this magnificent university, in this delightful city. But above all, I want to express on Elaine's behalf and myself, the humble gratitude for the privilege simply of sharing a room with Senator Danforth, who is a living role model in how religion can, in the public square, lift us to the better angels of our nature. Senator Danforth, everything you have written and everything you have said has been inspiring, but most inspiring of all is how you have lived and continued to live. Thank you for your inspiration, and bless you.

It is always wonderful when we're able to speak across divisions in faith, and I love ecumenical gatherings. Not all of them, however, have the happiest of endings, so as we were coming here this morning, seeing that this great university values religion highly, values by the building program, sport no less highly, I thought I might tell you a little episode which was very funny. When I had been chosen but not yet appointed as Chief Rabbi and George Carry had been chosen but not yet installed as Archbishop of Canterbury, somebody discovered that we both shared a passion. The only thing that Brits really take religiously is soccer, and somebody discovered that we both were great fans of the same soccer team, called Arsenal, and came to us

and said, “Would you like your first ecumenical gathering to be in our box in Highbury Stadium?” which is where Arsenal plays. So I said, “Wonderful,” and the archbishop said, [Hebrew] and it was agreed. So we went to a midweek match, for obvious religious reasons, night, flood-lit, and lo and behold, we were taken to meet the players, we were taken under the floodlights, on the sacred ground itself, and the word went around the grounds, the loudspeaker announcement announced, “We have with us tonight the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi,” and you could hear the buzz go around the grounds that whichever way you play the theological wager, that night Arsenal had friends in high places. They could not possibly lose. That night, Arsenal went down to their worst home defeat in 63 years. They lost 6-2 at home to Manchester United. The next day, a leading national paper in Britain carried a story which said as follows: “If the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi between them cannot bring about a win for Arsenal, does this not finally prove that God does not exist?” The next day they carried my reply, which went as follows: “No, it proves that God exists, it’s just that he supports Manchester United.”

Friends, that’s a light way into what actually is quite a serious subject. In my book *Not in God’s Name*, I raise a question: what is it that allows people to hate in the name of the God of love, kill in the name of the God of life, practice cruelty in the name of the God of compassion and wage war in the name of the God of peace? And I want to tell you a story about how it happens. My story begins, actually, in 1947, very famous episode, in which a young shepherd exploring some caves near the Dead Sea throws a stone into a little cave and hears the sound of breaking pottery. And as you know, that led to one of the most remarkable manuscript discoveries of recent times—of all times—the Dead Sea Scrolls, this extraordinary library of the Qumran sectarians. Now, the Dead Sea Scrolls are very famous, but what is slightly less famous was a very, very similar archeological discovery in very similar circumstances in the Sinai Desert two years earlier. Again, a young shepherd discovered buried in the ground a cache of manuscripts, which were actually 4th century Coptic translations of a series of Greek texts written by early Christian sectarians, including nine gospels hitherto unknown. We know that they existed because they’re referred to in the early Church fathers, but the texts were simply unavailable; these were texts from the 2nd century, though the manuscripts themselves were 4th century translations. They are known as the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, and they contain the texts known as the Gnostic Gospels. Now, although these two manuscript discoveries happened in very similar circumstances and at similar times, there are obvious differences between the two groups; one was Jewish, the Qumran sect, the other was Christian, and the Dead Sea Sectarians were basically producing these manuscripts in the 2nd century B.C.E. whereas the Gnostic Gospels come from the 2nd century C.E. Nonetheless, they have something in common, and it is very, very interesting. What is interesting is this: let me ask a very simple question. What happens to a monotheist when he or she loses faith? What do they fall into? In the Biblical age, obviously, the answer would be polytheism. That’s what the Israelites were *always* doing. Today, under the withering attacks of Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins, may God preserve them both, his Majesty’s loyal opposition, as I call them, say nowadays you would fall into atheism. But the interesting thing is that at this critical juncture in the axial age, as it were, what we find here is two groups of monotheists who fell into another kind of thing. Not polytheism, not atheism, but dualism. Dualism holds that there isn’t one force operative in the world but two: God, and against God, an active and independent force of Evil, known either as Satan, or the Antichrist, or the Prince of Darkness, Lucifer, Beelzebub, many, many names. There are two forces operative

in the universe, and the result is that humanity is divided into two: those who serve God, and those who serve the enemies of God. They are, in the language of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the children of light against the children of darkness.

And what dualists believe is that there will eventually be a major battle between these two forces, God and the force hostile to God: the earth will be shaken, the enemies of god will be defeated and destroyed, and what will emerge will be the rule of Heaven. In other words, the apocalypse. Now, dualism is not monotheism. It's incompatible with monotheism. And that's why the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi manuscripts are really fascinating. It explains why those texts were hidden, because they were regarded as heretical texts. It explains why both the Gnostic Christians and the Qumran sect were regarded as sectarians; these are not the mainstream of the religion. But nonetheless, we can tell how serious a threat dualism was to the early church and to the early synagogue. Let me give you just the Jewish example. Does anyone know what is the most undualistic line in the Hebrew Bible? The most antidualistic line in the Jewish Bible, I'm going to read; it comes from the prophet Isaiah. [Hebrew] Hear, o Israel, listen, o Israel, the lord our god the lord is one," is the affirmative statement. But it is a verse in Isaiah, which Jews here will recognize that really refutes dualism. It says that God is [Hebrew], God forms light and creates darkness. He makes peace and creates evil. So good and evil both come from God because everything comes from God. And the reason that Jewish people will recognize that line is because it was made by rabbis the very first sentence of communal prayer. Nowadays that's not the beginning of the service--anyway, nobody comes for the beginning of the service. But with just a slight change so as not to say that God creates evil explicitly, they changed the word evil to *everything*, but that is the first line of communal prayer. You see the rabbis never fought heretics by writing theology, by writing tracts; they fought heretics in the prayer book. That's another lecture for another time. But the prayer book turns out to be the book of Jewish belief. And they wanted people to know from the first sentence of public prayer that dualism has no place. So if the rabbis did that, the principle of dualism, the Hebrew for dualism, that there are two domains, was a major threat to Judaism, and Judaism fought it and eliminated it.

In Christianity it was a battle fought by Christianity for a very long time. Whenever you hear, for instance, the God of the Old Testament as against the God of the New Testament, you are hearing dualism. It was of course Marcion who said that Christianity must do without the Old Testament, because the god of the Old Testament is not the god of the New Testament. And that is Gnosticism, that is dualism. But the question is, how on earth does anyone become a dualist? I mean, what is it that forces monotheists to say, "I can no longer believe this anymore, I have to be a dualist!" Are you with me? What forces you to that? And the answer is that dualism arises under the situation of unbearable cognitive dissonance. When you can no longer make sense of the world in terms of your belief; the world that is, is simply not the world *as it should be* according to your sacred texts and your most profound religious beliefs. So as far as the Qumran sectarians are concerned, we can tell; the prophets all foresaw that after exile, Jews would come back from Babylon and the glory of the Second Temple would be greater than the First and eventually all the world would stream to Jerusalem, you know all the prophetic visions, and it didn't happen. Throughout the Second Temple period Israel never recovered its glory, it is then conquered by the Alexandrian empire, it then comes under the rule of the Ptolemies, then under the rule of the Seleucids, then, under the Maccabees, Jews fight, they regain their religious freedom, they regain their sovereignty, but the Maccabees become the Hasmonean kings, who

become as Hellenized as the people who they were fighting against originally. And we see the corruption of the priesthood; kings combine that with the role of the high priest, which is a fundamental breach of Jewish law and Jewish belief, what you in America call a separation of powers, and that is fundamental to Judaism, and so you find this group mainly of priests disillusioned with the corruption of the priesthood in Jerusalem leaving Jerusalem, leaving the cities, and settling in Qumran. The world simply hasn't emerged as the prophets said it would.

It is pretty obvious why then the Nag Hammadi Christians became Gnostics, because the Christian expectation was that with all the events retailed in the New Testament, the world was about to change, and the "kingdom of heaven" was about to be enacted on earth. But history continued as it had before, and therefore it was more reasonable to say that Jesus was actually teaching something else--that God is to be found in heaven, not down here on earth, earth was never created by god, the god of Genesis 1 is the demiurge, the fallen angel, the evil force who created the material physical world with all its injustice and all its pain, and the true god is the god of heaven. And in the gnostic gospels, the hero of Genesis 2 and 3, is actually the serpent. Once you become a gnostic, the whole world is turned upside down, because now you expect god in heaven, not on earth. So when you have unbearable cognitive dissonance, you then have the following: it becomes easier to say that these evil times have come upon us not because of God but because of the enemies of God. And when that is the only way you can make sense of your situation, you have dualism. And dualism has immediate psychological consequences. The monotheistic question when bad things happen is what? What does a monotheist ask? *What did I do wrong?* "Because of our sins, we were exiled from our land." *What did I do wrong? This evil came from God, what did I do wrong?* The gnostic changes this question and asks, "Who did this to me? This comes from the enemies of god, somebody did this to me. This evil doesn't come from God, it comes from Satan." Or in the language of today, from the Shi'a crusader-Zionist alliance. And that is the fateful move into dualism.

Now dualism is not confined to religion. I've mentioned it in a religious context, but we know that some of the supreme examples of dualism in the modern age were in fact not religious. The Nazis were dualist, Stalinist communism was dualist, the Hutus in Rwanda developed a dualism. And dualism is not itself, even when it's religious, a source of violence. Neither the Qumran sectarians nor the Gnostic Christians were in any way violent groups. Dualism becomes violent when you add two further elements: number one, we are living at the end of time, we are living in the apocalypse, and number two, it is up to us to set the process in motion, to force the end of time in the middle of time. When you get those three combined: dualism, a sense that we are living in the end of days and a sense that is up to us to trigger the end of days, then you have the phenomenon that I call in my book "pathological dualism." And pathological dualism is the key element that I try to analyze here. And here we touch on real human psychological and moral fundamentals. Is it easy to do evil to other people? The truth is, it is very hard, because we have, innately, a moral sense. That was the great contribution of the Scottish Enlightenment--sorry, I mean the great contribution of the Scottish was single malt whiskeys, but apart from that, the Scottish Enlightenment--Adam Smith, David Hume and the rest--that we have a fundamental moral sense. And as you probably know, all sorts of primatology and biology and evolutionary psychology has added flesh to the bones of that idea. I know this is a contested theory in neuroscience, but we have something, or we're supposed to have something, called mirror neurons. Mirror neurons make us feel pain when we see somebody else in pain. When we see

somebody else being hit, we wince. And it is that ability to sense someone else's pain that is the root of the moral sense: of empathy, sympathy, and compassion, feeling with. So it is, for anyone interested, Jean Dual at--is he at Emory University, I think--the one who has written all these books about bonobos and so on, he has written lots of books about how the high primates also have mirror neurons and they're also capable of altruism. It is therefore very difficult indeed to inflict pain on an innocent other human being, because we are inhibited by the moral sense. In order to do evil on a grand scale, that moral sense has somehow to be disabled, paralyzed, and neutralized. And that is what dualism does. This is what I want us to understand. Dualism is the most powerful form we have yet to discovered of paralyzing and rendering inoperative the moral sense. And dualism does this in three ways.

The first is, it dehumanizes our opponents. They're no longer human. They're agents of the devil. So the Nazis called Jews "lice," "vermin," "cancer," "gangerous limb." The Hutus called the Tutsis "cockroaches." Because dualism divides humanity into the saved and the damned, the human and the subhuman, those who save God and God's enemies. The second you dehumanize your opponents you have neutralized the human capacity for sympathy and empathy, which normally inhibits us from doing evil.

The second thing dualism does is it defines us, the good guys, as victims. Don't forget, the dualist does not ask "What did I do to deserve this?" The dualist asks, "Who did this to me?" And therefore I am a victim. It is they who are guilty and we who are their innocent victims. And therefore killing them is simply executing justice or revenge or protecting our people or honoring the memory of the dead. A victim is not responsible for what he or she does. Does that make sense? It's the oldest strategy known to man. When God said to Adam, "Why did you eat the fruit?" he said, "Please sir it wasn't me, it was her." He turns to Eve and says, "Why did you eat?" "It wasn't me, it was the serpent."

I love the story of the Sunday School teacher who labored to engage a class of rather spoiled thirteen-year-olds in Bible, and for a year tried to teach them the book of Joshua, and decided after a year he'd better make the end of term exam easy, and he said, "Please class, who destroyed the walls of Jericho?" Marvin at the back puts up his hand, and says, "Please sir, it wasn't me." The teacher is so scandalized he writes to Marvin's parents, "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Goldberg, I've been trying to teach your son the book of Joshua for a year, and when asked who destroyed the walls of Jericho, he said, 'Please sir, it wasn't me.'" The next day he gets an angry letter from Mr. and Mrs. Goldberg which says, "If our son says it wasn't him, it wasn't him!" Distraught, he goes to the headmaster and says, "You know, headmaster, I've tried to teach the guys the book of Joshua, and I asked them 'Who destroyed the walls of Jericho?' Martin says it wasn't him, and I wrote to his parents and they said it wasn't him..." And the president of the synagogue looks at him and gets out his checkbook and says, "Here's a thousand dollars. Get the walls repaired and stop giving me a hard time."

So denial of responsibility is pretty serious. But it is the second stage of dualism.

If you read *Not in God's Name*, I describe exactly how this worked. In Germany, Jews, who were less than two percent of the population, were held by Hitler to be the cause of World War One. They were the cause of Germany's defeat in that war. They were the cause of the punitive

terms of the Versailles Treaty. They were the cause of Germany's hyper-inflation. Because, for a dualist, we have to find someone who did this to us. And we then become the victim, and we are then absolved of any responsibility. Europe did the same in the 16th century about witches. Why did the crops fail? Witches. If you want to commit evil, you therefore have to define yourself as a victim, because this relieves you of all moral responsibility. Put dehumanization and victimhood together, and you arrive at the third and truly worrying phenomenon, which I gave in my book a deliberately paradoxical name. I called it "altruistic evil."

Because the truth is that when people commit evil, they tell themselves they're doing so for the highest motives. The Nazi literature on this is not well known, but I have included it in the book. Hitler and his acolytes believed that they were idealists, that they were people concerned to restore the honor of Germany, as indeed the Hutus were restoring the integrity of Rwanda, and so on. Avenging the humiliation of your kinsfolk is what allows you to commit altruistic evil. And altruistic evil does the third thing; dehumanization silences and paralyzes the moral sense, victimhood absolves you of responsibility, and altruistic evil destroys the voice of conscience, because you're telling yourself you're doing good and not bad. And that is why people sometimes kill in the name of the god of life, wage war in the name of the god of peace, practice cruelty in the name of the god of compassion and hate in the name of the god of love. It happens when dualism takes hold of a population. When people feel humiliated, when they feel the world is not as it should be, and they ask instead of "What did we do wrong?" they ask "Who is doing it to us?" When they see that now is the time in which heaven is going to restore the proper order of things, this is the time of the apocalypse, and when people see now is the time to begin the process of the end of time in the midst of time. And that is a very, very difficult phenomenon, and it is what we are living through right now.

So the question is, what is the antidote? What is the answer to dualism? And the short answer is, the answer to dualism is monotheism. That is why monotheism is important. Because monotheism sees God as the source of good and evil, and that means that we ourselves, made in God's image, are a mix of good and evil, we are a mix, each one of us, of light and darkness, and we have to choose; and the real battle is not the one out there, on the battlefield, in Syria or Iraq, the real battle is in here, within oneself. That is what God says to the first potential murderer in history, to Cain. He sees Cain is upset and feels humiliated, and says, "If you do good, will you not be accepted? But if not, sin is crouching at the door. It seeks to have you. But you can prevail over it." God is saying to Cain, the real battle is not you against Abel, it's you against you. And that's what the rabbis meant when they said, "Who is a hero? Not somebody who defeats his enemy but somebody who defeats himself." That is what the ultimate meaning of jihad is: that the ultimate battle is not out there, it's in here. That is what monotheism is about. And because we are responsible, monotheism is the refutation of victimhood. The biblical question is always, "What wrong did I do, and how can I put it right?" Not, "Who did this to me?" And that is the fundamental difference between the monotheistic mind and the polytheistic mind. It is the difference between on the one hand, Oedipus and on the other hand, Hamlet. Oedipus is battling against great forces outside himself; but Hamlet, whose "native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought," is fighting the battle within himself. Oedipus is a pagan figure, and Hamlet is the product of a Christian Europe.

So I've tried to show, number one, how religion can give rise to dualism, though the same is true of other totalizing ideologies. Number two, how dualism is capable of defeating the moral sense by destroying our sense of sympathy for the other who we now dehumanize, by absolving us of responsibility because now we're actually victims, and by destroying our conscience by telling us that we commit evil for altruistic reasons, for the highest good. And I've thirdly tried to show you that the answer to dualism is monotheism. It's refusing to split good and evil into two non-communicating realms: God and the devil, the children of light against the children of dark. We have to fight the good and evil inside ourselves, and the source of evil is not out there, but in here. You defeat evil the moment you stop fighting your enemies and conduct that battle within yourself. I know this is a dark theme, but this is a dark world right now, and therefore we have to be honest, and get to the roots of what is happening. The truth is that dualism begins by destroying its enemies, but it always ends by destroying itself. The Third Reich was supposed to last for a thousand years; it lasted for twelve. Marxist Communism, the Soviet Union, was supposed to usher in a messianic era of human history; it lasted for 70 years. The reason that dualism will never succeed in the long run is that it's false from beginning to end, because it misidentifies the problem. If you say the crops fail and people get ill because of witches, you can kill every witch in the world, and still crops will fail and people will get ill. If you say Jews are responsible for all the evils of the world, you can, God forbid, kill every Jew in the world, and you will find the evils of the world not diminished by one millimeter. And because dualism is false from beginning to end, it always ends in failure. But it has to be defeated. And that is the way we win; by defeating evil within ourselves, by saying that dualism is simply untrue. God is one, and we, too, are one.

Thank you very much, indeed.