
Neo-atheists like Richard Dawkins, the late Christopher Hitchens and Ed Harris have made a major contribution to modern civilization and culture. Their frontal assault on religion as “the source of all evil” has triggered the emergence of a cottage industry of first-rate scholarly and readable works aiming to debunk their sophomoric view of the subject of their ire. One such work is certainly the latest by Dr. Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain and the Commonwealth and a current member of the House of Lords. Even though his book, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning*, does not directly address transpersonal themes, his work nevertheless is very relevant to the
overall thrust and aims of transpersonal psychology and transpersonal theory in general.

Rabbi Sacks (2011) thunders that, “Atheism deserves better than the new atheists whose methodology consists of criticizing religion without understanding it, quoting texts without contexts … confusing folk belief with reflective theology, abusing, mocking, ridiculing, caricaturing, and demonizing religious faith and holding it responsible for the great crimes against humanity” (p. 11).

The neo-atheists’ claim that religion and science are incompatible with each other, that religion breeds violence and ignorance, and that it “poisons everything,” is masterfully exposed by Rabbi Sacks as a grotesque distortion and over-simplification of reality. Without denying the negative role that religion has often played in history, he demonstrates convincingly that the opposite situation is closer to the truth: The absence of religious anchoring has created far worse calamities for humanity. He mentions the unrestrained slaughter that was unleashed during and after the militantly anti-religious revolutions that took place since the Enlightenment. On this score, his views are similar to the work of sociologist of religion Peter Berger in his book, *Pyramids of Sacrifice*. If one is to contemplate a calculus of pain, secular ideologies have caused much more horrendous harm than any fundamentalist religion.

“The cure for bad religion,” Rabbi Sacks (2011) insists, “is good religion, not no religion, just as the cure for bad science is good science not the abandonment of science” (p. 11). It is an axiom for Rabbi Sacks that religion and science complement and need each other. Right at the start of his book, he frames his study within the parameters of the well-known aphorism by Einstein that, “Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind” (as cited in Sacks, 2011, p. 6). He hastens to add that one need not be religious to be an ethical and honorable person. In fact, he refers to several of his atheist professors of philosophy at Oxford that inspired him and sharpened his own ethical sensibilities. He does add, however, that overall, and in the long run, the takeover of a civilization by a purely secular worldview invites sooner or later a nihilistic outlook and a vacuum of meaning that can lead more often than not to collective phenomena of unspeakable evil: The French Guillotine, the Stalinist Gulags, the slaughter houses of Maoist China and Pol Pot’s Cambodia, and of course the archetypal horror of the Holocaust, “rationally” planned and scientifically executed by the Nazis.

Rabbi Sacks repeatedly reminds us that the proper sphere of science is explanation, the uncovering of the laws that govern the physical universe. Religion, on the other hand, focuses on meaning and interpretation. Science takes things apart to find out how they work. Religion puts things together to find out what they mean. In this context, Sacks rejects Stephen Gould’s notion of the “non-overlapping magisteria,” that religion and science must be kept separate as a way of solving the conflict between them. Instead, he argues that as Einstein pointed out, religion and science need each other. Sacks argues for a creative partnership of the two. He, in fact, views the essence of Western Civilization as the synthesis between Hebrew monotheistic religion and Greek
philosophical thought. His understanding is reminiscent of the yin and yang of Taoism as well as the much used metaphor of the left and right side of the brain. Ancient Greece planted the seeds of left-brain rational thought that eventually gave birth to the scientific revolution and contemporary secularism. Judaism, from its very beginning, represented the right side of the brain, the meaning side. These two pillars of western civilization need each other for a proper apprehension of reality and a right attitude towards the world in which we humans find ourselves. An interesting part of his work is the contrast he juxtaposes between Athens and Jerusalem as the two “pillars” of the Judeo-Christian civilization. Athens gave birth to tragedy and the notion of fate. Judaism offered hope and trust in an all-loving Creator and, therefore, ultimate freedom and meaning to individual existence. The God of Aristotle is framed in terms of an impersonal unifying principle of the One, the Unmoved Mover, indifferent to the fate of human beings and their tragedies. The God of Israel is the personal reality that interacts, speaks and makes covenants with humanity, starting with Abraham and the other prophets. It is a God who revealed Himself as a loving and compassionate Father, who created human beings in his own image, bestowing spiritual dignity to all humanity. It is the God who listens to prayer and who was inherited by the West through Christianity.

Rabbi Sacks offers us an accessible work that is very enjoyable to read, pollinated with a string of meaningful insights about the relationship between religion and science. His deep knowledge of the subject is awe inspiring, and one feels compelled to re-read his work time and again to benefit from the wisdom it unfolds. It is a real page-turner. Although he approaches his study from a global, non-denominational perspective, his focus and preference, understandably, is grounded almost exclusively within Judaism. The examples he offers in relating science to religion are drawn almost entirely from the Old Testament, which he insists must not be read literally. A literalist approach to religious scripture, in fact, unavoidably leads to distortions, the bread and butter of the religious fundamentalists and the neo-atheists.

One does, however, get the feeling that his deep love for Judaism and the Torah leads him to over-interpret, perhaps, certain aspects of the tradition that may indeed need to be rejected rather than interpreted. A similar approach surely applies to all other religions when scrutinized in light of contemporary vantage points of understanding. How can we “interpret,” for example, God’s injunction to Joshua to kill everything alive in Canaan? How else can we interpret it other than to simply consider it a form of genocidal tribal lore mixed in with authentic divine wisdom as conveyed to humanity via the mystic experiences of the great prophets? Leaving intact violent parts of what passes for inherited scripture by simply re-interpreting them offers fodder to the neo-atheists who debunk religion in its totality, good and bad. Did God actually give such a command to Joshua for mass slaughter or a similar command to Abraham to kill his own son? Can anyone in his right mind today consider such blind obedience as an exemplary form of perfect faith and trust in God?

Another possible and perhaps minor limitation of the work is Rabbi Sacks’ lack of consideration of the religious experience as a central factor in the
emergence and maintenance of religious worldviews; that in fact, contrary to the fervent wishes and beliefs of the neo-atheists, secularization may be impossible in the long run. It may be so because the religious experience is an integral aspect of human nature itself, and therefore will always pop up under diverse cultural and historical conditions. The prophetic stream is always present within any human population and in any historical period. In short, prophets and saints will always be around, even in the most atheistic and secular times.

The above-mentioned possible limitations do not diminish in any way the brilliance of Rabbi Sack’s passionate and scholarly exposition on how to think about the relationship between religion and science. I have no doubt that it will establish itself as a classic.

The Author

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Ph.D., has been Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, and has received honorary degrees from universities around the world. He is the award-winning author of more than twenty books, including *To Heal a Fractured World* and *Future Tense*. He writes frequently for *The Times* of London and other periodicals, and is heard regularly on the BBC. He was made a Life Peer and took his seat in the House of Lords in October 2009.

The Reviewer

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