

We have begun reading the Epistle of James as our second reading. It is more of a homily than a letter, and is a masterpiece of pastoral direction. Martin Luther, the reformer hated it, calling it “ a letter of straw” as it takes issue with the idea of “Faith Alone” one of the pillars upon which his reformation was built. James argues that faith without works is empty faith. That however, comes later. We heard part of his introduction today and he speaks of the nature of true religion.

The nature of true religion, he says, is to use words properly and to act with charity towards the poor, who in the Hebrew Bible are characterised as the orphans and widows.

His definition of true religion would not find too much support today among the general population of our land. Religion for many has become synonymous with what is false, corrupt and damaging. Religion, after all, causes most wars. It leads young men and women from good homes and decent school to travel to Syria to join one of the most murderous groups of any age, who behead charity workers and aged professors, on camera, as publicity material, in the name of God.

And it isn't just Islam which commits murder and brutalities in God's name. There is the concept of '*heren*' in the Hebrew Bible – holy war in which God demands all the enemy, men, women and children be massacred without mercy. It was failure to eradicate Malek and the Amelakites which enraged the prophet Samuel and led to Saul, the first King of Israel's downfall.

Christianity had the Crusades, called by Pope Urban II in 1095 preached by St Bernard, and the Crusaders first acts, before they had left Europe was to massacre Jews in Cologne, Worms, and Mainz. Religious wars between Christians have been prolonged and bloody and have continued down to our day in Northern Ireland.

Jonathan Sacks, formerly the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of the Commonwealth, deals with these issues in his latest Book, “*Not in God's Name - Confronting Religious Violence*” \* It is a thoughtful and powerful work. “Too often in the history of religion,” he writes, “people have killed in the name of the God of life, waged war in the name of the God of peace, hated in the name of the God of love, and practised cruelty in the name of the God of compassion.” (p3)

He introduces the concept of '*altruistic evil*'. Altruism is acting selflessly. Doing something which is worth doing because it is worth doing even though it is at great cost to oneself, and may even mean dying in performing the good and generous act. Altruism is the argument that defeats those who argue that human beings are

fundamentally selfish, programmed to act so as to ensure their own genes survive and are handed down to subsequent generations. Altruism counters the theory that evolution moves on by the fittest surviving.

Today, however, we see a new form of altruism whereby people will give up lives of relative comfort, to travel to the world's most dangerous places to commit acts of great cruelty at the risk of their own lives, or even to murder themselves in the act of killing as many others as possible, and they believe they are doing good, they think they are promoting a noble cause, they are acting in God's name. They are not committing acts of war but acts of sheer evil, killing the young and old indiscriminately, the innocent who have done them no harm but who are not one of them, defined by religion, race or nationality.

Sacks convincingly argues that it is not religion that promotes violence, not directly at least. Human beings are good and bad, capable of great good and great evil. Why? “we are social animals and we live, survive and thrive in groups. Within groups we practise altruism. Between them we practise aggression. Religion enters the equation only because it is the most powerful force ever devised for the creation and maintenance of large-scale groups by solving the problem of trust between strangers. // Violence has nothing to do with religion as such. It has to do with identity and life in groups. Religion sustains groups more effectively than any other force. It suppresses violence within. It rises to the threat of violence from without. Most conflicts and wars have nothing to do with religion whatsoever. They are about power, territory and glory, things that are secular, even profane. But if religion can be enlisted it will be.” (p.39)

Violence has to do with identity. In the West there is now the most individualistic era of all time. The promotion of the individual has in effect abolished groups and thus abolished identity. In our culture, here in the contemporary western world, “the central values are in ethics autonomy; in politics individual rights; in culture post-modernism; and in religion 'spirituality'. Its idol is the self, its icon the 'selfie'; and its operating systems the free market ... (he concludes) We no longer know who we are or why.” (p41)

Sacks refers to the sociologist Emile Durkheim who pointed out that when a society loses a shared moral code, in other words people lose their identity, they no longer know who they are or why they are here, the consequence is suicide. People choose death rather than life. Sacks believes a variant of this is happening in our time. “it is the reason why seemingly normal, well-educated and adjusted people with careers and families ahead of them become jihadists and suicide bombers, choosing death rather than life.” (p42).

These people are not psychopathic, not driven by poverty or social exclusion, nor

driven by religious extremism as such. “If they are suffering from anything, it is from what they see as the emptiness, meaninglessness, materialism and narcissism of the contemporary West and the corruption of secular regimes in the Islamist world.” (p42). They gain community and thus identity. They are motivated by genuine ideals. They are altruists but they commit altruistic evil.

I have only referred to the opening two chapters of this important work, which deserves a wide readership and close reflection. Religion is not the problem, rather, Sacks cogently argues, it can provide a way towards a solution. He examines biblical texts and offers re-readings which give a different and helpful perspective on the relations between the three great Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is no work of straw. Read it.

\*Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2015.