

In his book *Not In God's Name*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks introduces a term he calls altruistic evil. Altruistic evil is evil committed in a sacred cause or the name of high ideals.

Recent examples abound. In 2013, more than 50 Christian, mostly Coptic Christian churches were bombed or burned in what has been referred to as Egypt's Kristallnacht.ⁱ The last remaining church in Afghanistan was burned to the ground in 2010.ⁱⁱ

Eight thousand Muslims were murdered in 1995 in the massacre at Srebrenica and many others raped, tortured or deported.ⁱⁱⁱ

Islamist violence focuses mostly on Muslims. The University of Maryland's Global Terror Database estimated that about half of terrorist attacks and 60 percent of all fatalities between 2004 and 2013 occurred in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, all of which are majority Muslim.^{iv}

Jews, of course, are also targeted. In one example, four Jews were shot in a kosher supermarket in Paris on January 9, 2015.^v Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and Baha'is have also been targeted. The ancient sect of Yazidis in Northern Iraq have been nearly eliminated by ISIS.^{vi}

Most recently, of course, there have been attacks in Paris (November 13, 2015), San Bernardino (Dec 2, 2015) and Brussels (March 22, 2016).

Islam is not wholly to blame for atrocities. Nationalist Buddhists and Hindus have also been among the perpetrators in some countries.^{vii} The Srebrenica massacre was politically motivated. Christians also contribute to the carnage of altruistic evil. The New York Times reported in November, 2015, after three persons were murdered at a Colorado Springs abortion clinic, that at least 11 people had been killed in attacks on abortion clinics in the United States since 1993.^{viii}

Altruistic evil is not a new phenomenon, nor is religion wholly to blame. Some of the world's most heinous crimes had nothing to do with religion, although religious practitioners may have been the target or scapegoat. The Holocaust was about racism and nationalistic fervor. Five to six million Jews are estimated to have been killed.^{ix} Under Stalin's rule, respected historians estimate between 20 and 60 million died in the Soviet Union in purges, labor camps and manufactured famines.^x An estimated 36 million starved in Mao Zedong's China during the great famine.^{xi} One and one-half to three million are estimated to have died in the Killing Fields of Pol Pot's Cambodia. These latter episodes of altruistic evil were fueled by secular ideology.^{xii}

In *Not in God's Name*, R. Sacks focuses on what he terms the politicized religious violence of the 21st century, and in particular, that which is occurring within and between the three great monotheistic faiths, the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For those who may not be familiar, Abraham is considered the father of the Jews. By extension, he is also the father of Christianity and Islam.

You see, Abraham fathered two sons. The elder was born of his wife Sarah's slave Hagar, and was called Ishmael. The younger son, Isaac, was born of Abraham's previously infertile wife Sarah. After Isaac was born, Ishmael and Hagar were banished to the desert, supposedly at the insistence of Sarah. According to Islamic scripture, Ishmael became the father of all Arab peoples. Isaac fathered the nation of the Israelites according to the Hebrew Bible. You begin to see why there is built in tension between these three monotheistic religions.

Many generations, and several imperialist conquerors later, a Jewish child by the name of Jesus was born. According to some, Jesus was the long awaited Messiah who was going to rescue Judaism from its Roman occupiers and restore Israel to its former glory. The early Christians scoured the Hebrew Bible, looking for portents and justifications that Jesus was the one who had been promised. The Hebrew Bible was relegated to Old Testament status. The New Testament was birthed in the 100 or so years after Christ died.

Christianity (according to the Christians) was the universal religion, meaning "one God, one truth, one way, one path to salvation, one gateway to heaven."^{xiii} Judaism had never claimed to be universal; the Jews understood themselves to be God's chosen, but they also understood that God loved others who understood the Divine differently.

Six hundred years after Christ was born, another prophet was born by the name of Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Muslims believed that Islam, as the universal religion, supplanted both Judaism and Christianity as the one truth, the one way to salvation. Universal religions do not tend to lead to tolerance. Note that this definition of universal is different than how we understand it in our Unitarian Universalist heritage. Our brand of universalism was originally about universal salvation and has evolved to appreciating what is universal among all peoples.

R. Sacks takes exception to the universalist, one-true-way stance of Christianity and Islam. He uses the Hebrew Bible, primarily Genesis, to do so. As a Jew, this is his sacred text. For Christians and Muslims, the Hebrew Bible is also considered sacred. There are difficult passages in Genesis, as in much of the Bible. The same is true of the Qur'an, the sacred scripture of Islam. Read literally, the Bible and Qur'an seem to condone violence in many places. Unfortunately, this is how fundamentalist believers of all faiths read their scripture. R. Sacks says that "hard

texts need interpreting; without it, they lead to violence."^{xiv} For most of their histories, all three faiths have wrestled with the meanings of their scriptures.^{xv} Literalism is a recent phenomenon. Let me repeat that; literal interpretation of scripture is a recent phenomenon.

Earlier, I spoke of the half-brothers Ishmael and Isaac. The violence in this relationship occurs when Ishmael and his mother are banished to the desert. Without careful reading, one might think that this was justification for war between Islam and Judaism. R. Sacks does a beautiful job of exegesis, or Biblical analysis, with this story. With careful reading and interpretation of the original Hebrew, he makes the strong case that God also loved Ishmael and Hagar. God promises Hagar that Ishmael will father a mighty people. God saves Hagar and Ishmael in the desert by guiding her to a spring. Finally, when Abraham dies, the two brothers meet cordially at his funeral.

In the story of The Good Samaritan, Jesus commands that we love our neighbor. This was not new to the listeners. What was new was that he redefined neighbor to include the stranger and even our enemies.

R. Sacks teases this same message out of the Genesis story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph was the youngest but one of twelve brothers, and was the favorite of his father, Jacob. Because of the favoritism and because Joseph was cocky about it, his brothers hated him. They concocted a scheme to murder him, but in the end, couldn't do it. Instead, they sold him into slavery with the Egyptians.

Now Joseph was an interpreter of dreams, and although he was a slave, this came to the Pharaoh's attention. He had been having troubling dreams that none of his court advisors could help him understand. He summoned Joseph, who rose to the challenge. Turns out the Pharaoh was being warned of a coming 7 year drought and famine. Joseph recommended that in the interim, a portion of each year's harvest be stored so that the kingdom could weather the famine. Joseph's star rose, and he became a trusted advisor of the Pharaoh.

The drought arrives and Jacob and his sons and their families are starving in Canaan. He sends his sons to buy grain in Egypt. Of course, the person they interact with is Joseph, their brother. He recognizes them but they do not recognize him. Through a carefully orchestrated series of plot twists, Joseph engineers something R. Sacks calls role reversal; through role reversal, his brothers come to understand what it would be like to be sold into slavery. At this point, Joseph forgives them and reveals himself.

In a modern day story of role reversal, Csanad Szegedi was a rising star in the ultra-nationalist Jobbik party in Hungary. The party has been described as fascist, neo-Nazi, racist and anti-Semitic.^{xvi} It's 2012. Some of Szegedi's rivals within the party went looking for dirt with which to undermine him. They found some; a bombshell. It turns out that Szegedi was a Jew. This was a tightly held family secret that he and his brother had never been let in on. Szegedi's maternal grandmother was a survivor of Auschwitz, as was his maternal grandfather. After the war, his grandmother made a decision that many survivors did. They would fully assimilate to the Christian culture and let their Jewish heritage die, so that their future generations would be safe. To say that Szegedi was shocked, that his world was turned upside down, is an understatement. Can you imagine?

After a period of wandering in the desert, Szegedi went to the local rabbi, who was more than a little reluctant to meet with him. Szegedi eventually accepted himself as Jewish; he attends synagogue, keeps Shabbat, has learned Hebrew and was circumcised. He has changed his name to Dovid. His wife is in the process of converting. He hopes that his young sons will have Bar Mitzvahs.^{xvii} While many in the synagogue have accepted him, there are still those who believe that it is all a ruse, a way to infiltrate their community. As for Dovid...he now give talks to several hundred school children each week, speaking out against anti-Semitism.

In the story of Joseph and his brothers, Joseph engineered a situation in which his brothers had to make a choice about becoming slaves. Dovid Szegedi's choice was not his own. R. Sacks maintains that role reversal, the ability to imagine ourselves as the "Other," is critical in generating compassion for the Other. Imagine ourselves in the stranger's shoes. This is what is largely missing in current affairs. It is certainly missing among terrorist organizations. It is also missing in the current dialogue, if one can call it that, about immigration into this country. It can easily be missing in our own UU dialogue regarding those who find Donald Trump appealing and why they do. When this skill is undeveloped or goes missing in interpersonal relations, things tend to get rocky.

Our first principle states that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The ability to imagine ourselves as the other is a critical skill to living our first principle and to living compassionately.

May it be so.

ⁱ Jonathan Sacks, *Not In God's Name*, Schocken Books, New York, 2015. 6

ⁱⁱ NGN, 6

ⁱⁱⁱ NGN, 7

^{iv} NGN, 7

^v NGN, 8

^{vi} NGN, 8

^{vii} NGN, 8

^{viii} Liam Stack, A Brief History of Deadly Attacks on Abortion Providers, NYT, 11/29/2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/11/29/us/30abortion-clinic-violence.html> Accessed 4/22/16.

^{ix} <http://www.projetaladin.org/holocaust/en/40-questions-40-answers/basic-questions-about-the-holocaust.html>
Accessed 4/23/16

^x <http://www.ibtimes.com/how-many-people-did-joseph-stalin-kill-1111789> Accessed 4.23/2016

^{xi} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Chinese_Famine Accessed 4/23/16

^{xii} NGN 10

^{xiii} NGN

^{xiv} NGN 208

^{xv} NGN 208

^{xvi} NGN 177

^{xvii} Sara Miller Llana, How a hidden past changed an anti-Semitic leader into a Jewish seeker, Christian Science Monitor, April 30, 2015. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2015/0430/How-a-hidden-past-changed-an-anti-Semitic-leader-into-a-Jewish-seeker> Accessed 4/22/16.