

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: Religious Pluralism and the Partnership of Religion and Science

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Abstract

Rabbi and Lord Jonathan Sacks (1948-2020) was the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013. Although he was recognized as the spiritual head of the United Synagogue, the largest synagogue body in the United Kingdom, his authority was not recognized by the Haredi Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, or by non-Orthodox Jewish congregations that belong to Masorti, Reform and Liberal Judaism. Although his authority was limited, Rabbi Sacks was a highly influential public intellectual of global renown and impact. Writing to Jewish and non-Jewish audiences, Rabbi Sacks articulated his views on a range of existential problems and challenges, including the breakdown of the family, religious violence, the loss meaning and the rise of despair, political polarization, and climate change. While speaking in a particularly Jewish idiom and from a Judaic perspective, Rabbi Sacks became a spiritual guide to millions of people worldwide who appreciated his wisdom and the wisdom of Judaism. His contribution to the spiritual dimension of human life was formally recognized in 2016 when he received the Templeton Prize for his life-long contribution to humanity. This essay explores the relationship between Rabbi Sacks' approach to religious pluralism and his contribution to the dialogue of religion and science. The essay argues that Rabbi Sacks was a post-secular thinker who offered a distinctly Judaic approach to humanity's current challenges. By "universalizing particularity," as Rabbi Sacks defined his own project, Rabbi Sacks sought to prevent the clash of civilizations and to heal our divided world.

Keywords

Science and religion; Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch; *Torah im Derekh Eretz*; Neo-Orthodoxy; universalism; particularism; pluralism; multiculturalism

Introduction

We all still mourn the untimely death of Rabbi and Lord Jonathan Sacks, a moral philosopher, Judaica scholar, communal leader, and public intellectual. More than any other Jewish thinker today, Rabbi Sack has articulated a sober, moderate, and pragmatic approach to the challenges that face humanity today. In 2016, four years prior to his untimely death in 2020, Rabbi Sacks' contribution to humanity was recognized worldwide when he was awarded the Templeton Prize for his "appreciation and respect of all faiths, with the emphasis that recognizing the values of each is the only path to effectively combat the global rise of violence and terrorism."¹ In the official press release, the award committee mentioned Rabbi Sacks' most recent publication at the time, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, in which he defended religious pluralism and challenged bigotry, hatred, and violence, especially when promoted in the name of religion.² The official announcement of the Templeton Prize also cited *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning*,³ as the justification for the award. Rabbi Sacks, so the award committee stated, "boldly defends the compatibility of religion and science, a response to those who consider them necessarily separate and distinct."⁴

What is the connection between Rabbi Sacks' view on religious pluralism and his view on the relationship of religion and science? What was Rabbi Sacks' message that led the Templeton Foundation to award him "one of the largest annual awards given to an individual," an award "that honors a living person who has made exceptional contributions to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works?"⁵ What is the significance of Rabbi Sacks' legacy to contemporary culture of Jews and non-Jews? Focusing on Rabbi Sachs' *The Great Partnership*, I answer these questions by making three arguments that frame the three parts of the essay. Part 1 argues that Rabbi Sacks was a social critic who not only correctly identified the ills and challenges of contemporary Western society but also offered a well-reasoned, eloquent, and action-oriented solution to these problems. For Rabbi Sacks, religion, and especially the three Abrahamic traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, offer the deepest and most compelling responses to these social ills. Part 2 presents Rabbi Sacks' argument that to live truthful and meaningful life we need both

¹ See "Press Release" of the Templeton Prize 2016 available at <https://templetonprize.org>

² Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting religion Violence* (New York: Schocken, 2015).

³ Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion and the Search for Meaning* (London: Houghton and Stoughton, 2011)

⁴ "Press Release," *ibid.*

⁵ "Press Release," *ibid.*

science and religion. I maintain that in insisting on the complementarity of science and religion, Rabbi Sacks was the most eloquent voice of the post-secular moment, one in which religion is not reduced to the private sphere but is openly and unapologetically present in the public sphere. And Part 3 outlines the distinctly Judaic contribution of Rabbi Sacks to science and religion by predicating the so called “Great Partnership” of science and religion on what he called “the dignity of difference,” the cornerstone of his religious pluralism. In other words, Rabbi Sacks offered a particularistic Judaic approach to humanity’s universal problems, one that is grounded in the close reading of the Hebrew Bible.

1. The Dignity of Difference and the Failure of Multiculturalism

Rabbi Sack’s position on religious pluralism and on the relationship of science and religion is best understood if we see him as an heir of Rabbi Raphael Samson Hirsch (d. 1888), the founder of Neo-Orthodoxy.⁶ Hirsch’ commitment to *Torah im derech erez* best captures the path taken by Rabbi Sacks. Accordingly, Judaism should be open to secular learning, but Judaism is not to be reduced to secular knowledge since Judaism manifests revealed knowledge that supersedes secular knowledge. Therefore, Jews should be fully integrated in society and culture of their country of residence, but without giving up on their distinctive religious identity. Rather, Jews should serve as “*or la-goyyim*,” bringing the unique message of biblical monotheism to the society at large. This, I submit, is precisely how Rabbi Sacks lived and why he was so effective in addressing issues that Hirsch could not have anticipated: modern secularism, globalized capitalism, deconstructionist postmodernism, atheist hedonism, evolutionary Darwinism, and technoscientific transhumanism. In his numerous writings, Rabbi Sacks addressed a mixed audience of Jews and non-Jews as a modern Orthodox Jew who lives by the vision of *Torah im derech erez*, commonly translated as “Torah and Secular Knowledge,”⁷ and serves as *or la-goyyim*, namely, “Light to the

⁶ See Philipp Feldheim, *The Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, 9 vols. (New York: Feldheim, 1984-2012). For a comprehensive study of Samson Raphael Hirsch interpretation of Judaism see Noah H. Rosenbloom, *Tradition in the Age of Reform: The Religious Philosophy of Samson Raphael Hirsch* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976).

⁷ Literally, the phrase ‘*derekh erez*’ means “the way of the land” and it signifies moral norms, ethical values, and habits of thought. The phrase appears first in the Mishnah, Tractate Avot, 2: 2 and 3:20 in the context of rabbinic debates about the relationship between the divine revealed Torah and universal morality. For explication of *derekh erez* in rabbinic ethics consult Max Kadushin, *Organic Thinking: A Study in Rabbinic Thought* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1938); idem, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1972). In the 19th century, Samson Raphael Hirsch made “*Torah im derekh erez*,” the organizing principle and

Nations.”⁸ Dressing this vision in a philosophical garb, Rabbi Sacks characterized his life’s work as “universalizing particularity,” the subtitle of his volume in the *Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers*, of which I was the editor-in-chief.⁹

To understand this vision, it is instructive to look at Rabbi Sacks’ intellectual trajectory. Although he was born into a Jewish family that observed the traditional way of life, Rabbi Sacks was educated in non-Jewish schools: Saint Mary’s Primary School, Christ College at Oxford, and then at Cambridge University. His father, Louis Sacks (d. 1996), was a Polish Jew who came to England at the age of 6, after the family fled pogroms in Poland and settled in the London’s East End. Louis Sacks married Louisa “Libby” Frumkin (d. 2010), and the family eked out a living from the father’s work in the second-hand clothing business and in the wine store of Libby’s family.¹⁰ Rabbi Sacks described his father as a pious Jew “who went to synagogue every day. He did not understand much Hebrew, but this he knew: he was a Jew, he believed in God, and his fate was in God’s hands. That was enough for him. Louis walked tall.”¹¹ As the official biography of Rabbi Sacks states, the parents instilled in Rabbi Sacks and his siblings “enormous devotion to education, Judaism and the wider society, a blend of secularism and religion that would become the template of his lifelong pursuit.”¹² This is what *Torah im derekh erez* meant in England of the 20th century: openness to secular culture along with proud affirmation of one’s Jewish religio-ethnic identity.

At Cambridge University, young Jonathan Sacks read philosophy with the atheist moral philosopher, Bernard Williams (d. 2003), who challenged Sacks to probe into his own unexamined religious beliefs. This was in the mid-1960s, when British academy was undergoing major transformation as Logical Positivism reached what Sacks later called “a dead end” and as the dominant theories of moral philosophy – Deontology and

educational philosophy of Neo-Orthodoxy in Germany, signaling a desire to integrate traditional Judaism with modern culture, contrary to either Ultra Orthodoxy that rejected Jewish involvement in modern culture, on the one hand, and Reform Judaism, that was critical of rabbinic Judaism, on the other hand. While Hirsch deeply impacted German and English Jewries in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in America his impact was more limited. See Zev Eleff, “American Orthodoxy’s Lukewarm Embrace of the Hirschian Legacy, 1850-1939,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 45 (no. 3) (2012): 35-53; and idem, “Between Bennett and Amsterdam Avenues: The Complex American Legacy of Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1939-2013,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 46 (4) (2013): 8-27.

⁸ The phrase, ‘*or la-goyyim*,’ originated in Isaiah 42:6.

⁹ See Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Aaron W. Hughes (eds.) *Jonathan Sacks: Universalizing Particularity*, Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

¹⁰ Libby’s grandfather, Aryeh Leib Frumkin (1845-1916) was a rabbi, Zionist, and pioneer among the founders of Petach Tikvah, the first *Moshavah* in Palestine founded in 1878. After an Arab attack on Petach Tikvah in 1893 he moved to London where he operated the family’s wine shop, but later returned to Petach Tikvah, where he died and was buried in 1916.

¹¹ Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, pp. 183-184.

¹² “The Life of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks,” official website, <http://rabbisacks.org>.

Consequentialism – were challenged by the analytically trained religious philosopher, G.E.M. Anscombe who promoted a return to ancient virtue ethics.¹³ Jonathan Sacks, the young philosophy student, was most attuned to these academic debates as well as to the cultural upheaval worldwide brought about by countercultural youth who challenged authority, tradition, and sexual mores. To grapple with these tumultuous times and clarify to himself what he believed, he traveled to the US and Canada to meet with public intellectuals and religious leaders. This was a transformative experience. By his own admission, the encounter with Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik introduced him to “a new kind of Jewish thought, based not on philosophical categories but on halakha, Jewish law,”¹⁴ and the encounter with Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, led him to see the predicament of the Jewish people. Summarizing the meanings of these experiences, Rabbi Sacks famously quipped: “Rabbi Soloveitchik had challenged me to think. Rabbi Schneerson had challenged me to lead. In both – though neither spoke of it – I sensed the extent to what Jewish life had lost in the Holocaust.”¹⁵

After the transformative summer of 1968, young Sacks returned to Cambridge to start his graduate training in Philosophy, continuing first with Bernard Williams in Cambridge and later in Oxford University with Philippa Foot, a disciple of Anscombe and a major contributor to the revival of virtue ethics.¹⁶ But after a few years of studying and teaching philosophy, he renounced the academic path and embarked on a serious study of Judaism. Young Sacks would quench his thirst for meaning *not* in the halls of the secular university, but in the two yeshivot that ordained him as a rabbi in 1976 as well as in Jews' College, committed to the academic study of Judaism. After getting a Ph.D. from University College London in 1981, Rabbi Sacks served for many years as the Principal of Jews' College, later to be renamed London School of Jewish Studies.¹⁷ This biographical information illustrates that Rabbi Sacks' intellectual trajectory and professional life indeed actualized the ideal of *Torah im derekh erez* but not as his parents had imagined it. By his own admission to Isaiah Berlin, in

¹³ G.E. M. Anscombe's essay, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33 (no. 124) (1958): 1-19 revolutionized moral philosophy. For overview of her philosophy and impact see Eric Wiland and Julia Driver “Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2022 [2009]) and the bibliography cited there. Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/anscombe/>. Rabbi Sacks refers to Anscombe and to the emergence of virtue ethics in Oxford, in *The Great Partnership*, p. 147.

¹⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 90.

¹⁵ Sacks, *ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁶ Sacks, *ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁷ While Rabbi Sacks was recognized as the official representative of the Jewish religious minority in England, his authority was not recognized either by the Haredi community or by the community of Liberal and Progressive Jews. Internal Jewish divisions aside, for many all over the world Rabbi Sacks was the spiritual leader and official voice of British Jewry.

his youth Sacks considered himself (somewhat tongue-in-chick) as a “lapsed heretic,”¹⁸ but after his decision to leave academia in 1973, his intellectual trajectory resembled more that of a *ba'al teshuvah* (i.e., a returnee to traditional Judaism) who was on the path of “finding God,” the title of Chapter 4 in *The Great Partnership* where Sacks tells and reflects on his personal trajectory.¹⁹

Committed to *Torah im derekh eretz*, Rabbi Sacks indeed was conversant with many dimensions of Western culture (e.g., literature, philosophy, history, law, religion, and science), bringing his philosophical training to bear on any topic under consideration. However, I maintain that Rabbi Sacks did not write as a professional philosopher but as a social theorist who sought to address pressing social problems. To do so, he had no choice by theorizing the relationship between “religion” and “science,” because in modern culture these are the most comprehensive conceptual frameworks that delineate the path to truth. Yet, throughout his writings Rabbi Sacks insisted that there is no such thing as “Religion” (capital “R”), but only religious traditions that encompass people, communities, sacred texts, rituals, and habits of heart and mind. Religion is always a living reality that varies over time and place and its distinctive identity is always particularistic, inseparable from culture, history, and memory. Religious plurality and diversity pose an inevitable social challenge: How can diverse traditions co-exist peacefully with each other, without seeking domination, without resorting to violence, and without denying the freedom to believe? Rabbi Sacks’ response to that question was the brilliant phrase, “dignity of difference.”²⁰ The book he published under that title has a twofold message: it offers sustained defense of religious pluralism without

¹⁸ “Finding God,” in *The Great Partnership*, pp.

¹⁹ The Baal Teshuvah movement emerged in the late 1960s when thousands of Jews who grew up in secular or Liberal/Progressive forms of Judaism became observant, Orthodox Jews. The movement reflected a spiritual yearning of Jewish youth who were dissatisfied by the spiritual quality of Jewish life in Reform and Conservative synagogues or disappointed by secular Zionism. The same spiritual quest of the late 1960s and early 1970s also led young Jewish seekers to find their way to non-Jewish spiritual traditions, especially Buddhism. See Emily Sigalow, *American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists and Religious Change* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019).

²⁰ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, revised edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2003 [2002]). The book sparked a storm of criticism from Orthodox rabbis in England and in Israel. In the London’s *Jewish Chronicle*, Rabbi Joseph Dunner and Rabbi Bezalel Rakow demanded that Rabbi Sacks “repudiate the thesis of the book and withdraw the book from circulation” because he regarded Christianity and Islam as valid. In Israel, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliashiv also challenged Rabbi Sacks and the Jerusalem Post even demanded Rabbi Sacks’ resignation. Rabbi Sacks argued that his position has been misunderstood, but in the revised edition of *Dignity of Difference* (2003) he either removed or rephrased some of the controversial statements to the chagrin of more moderate Orthodox rabbis (e.g., Rabbi Jeremy Rosen) or Reform/Progressive rabbis (e.g., Rabbi Jonathan Romain). The controversy had more to do with internal power struggle within the Orthodox world than with reasoned debate about the theological merit of world religions. For philosophic analysis of religious pluralism in philosophy of religion see Avi Sagi, “Religious Pluralism Assessed,” *Sophia* 38 (2) (1999): 93-115.

endorsing multiculturalism, and conversely, it uses philosophic arguments to protect particularism from being reduced to universalism.

In the *Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Sacks declares from the outset, “I am not a liberal Jew. My faith is Orthodox.”²¹ Contrary to Liberals (Jews or non-Jews) who are skeptical about the objective status of certain beliefs, values, and norms, Rabbi Sacks asserts categorically: “I do not believe that the sanctity of human life and the inalienable freedoms of a just society are relative. They are religious absolutes. They flow directly from the proposition that it was not we who created God in our image but God who made us in His image.”²² These religious absolutes, Rabbi Sacks avers are “the very tradition that Jews, Christians, and Muslims ... share.”²³ Precisely because the three Abrahamic traditions share these foundational religious beliefs, Rabbi Sacks can communicate with members of these religious traditions, while recognizing the distinctiveness and particularity of each tradition. Challenging all of us to “exorcize Plato’s ghost” (namely, the universalizing tendencies of Western philosophy), Rabbi Sacks asserts that “universalism must be balanced with a new respect for the local, the particular, the unique.”²⁴ If we are to avoid the clash of civilizations and prevent bloodshed and violence, we must be able to recognize and protect diversity, otherness, and multiplicity. But if we do so, don’t we simply endorse multiculturalism, precisely as the Liberals have done in the name of democracy? Sacks’ answer is, *not necessarily*.

According to Rabbi Sacks, multiculturalism was right to recognize historicity and cultural diversity, thereby correcting the Enlightenment’s determination “to abolish identity in the name of the universal.”²⁵ But multiculturalism, which Rabbi Sacks traces to the liberalism of the 1960s, went too far: it gave rise to identity politics that overtime corroded the common good, precisely because it made “the individual as the bearer of rights, and of autonomy as the supreme value of the social order.”²⁶ In his judgement, “identity politics deepened the fragmentation caused by multiculturalism, adding to it not just culture and ethnicity but also other forms of identity based on gender and sexual orientation.”²⁷ Mincing no words, he warns us against it saying: “there is a real danger here of the splitting of society into self-

²¹ Sacks, *Dignity of Difference*, p. 18.

²² Sacks, *Dignity of Difference*, p. 19.

²³ Sacks, *Dignity of Difference*, p. 19.

²⁴ *Dignity of Difference*, p. 20.

²⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), p. 130.

²⁶ Sacks, *Morality*, p. 116.

²⁷ Sacks, *Morality*, p. 137.

segregating, non-communicating ghettos.”²⁸ Multiculturalism was mistaken because instead of respecting difference, it

“turns difference into exclusion and suspicion. It builds walls, not bridges. It abdicates the hard work of understanding, respecting and working with and for the people not like us. It encourages a mindset of victimhood and oppression. It abandons ideas of the common ground and the common good.”²⁹

As an Orthodox Jew, a Chief Rabbi, a moral philosopher, and a social theorist, Rabbi Sacks adamantly protected “the right to be different,” a right that belongs not to the “liberal democratic state” but to the “compassionate society.”³⁰ Because of unbridled multiculturalism, so Sacks argues, Western society has become fragmented, conflictual, and dysfunctional since we have lost the vision of the common good based on religious absolutes. How can this be restored? By gaining the correct view on the relationship between the particular and the universal, between human reason and divine revelation, between science and religion, between the secular and the sacred. Put differently, to protect the dignity of difference but without corroding the common good, we need to have a proper understanding of the two main frameworks that provide meaning to people today: namely, science and religion. Having explained the linkage between pluralism and the discourse of science and religion, I will now examine his proposed partnership of science and religion, a partnership that respects and protects difference.

2. Science and Religion: Partnership and Difference?

Rabbi Sacks was a master communicator, and he was fond on using what he called “the drama of ideas” as a heuristic device that illustrates difference. In short, pithy sentences he juxtaposed different views to capture their gist and make it clear for his readers. Here is how Rabbi Sacks explained the differences between “science” and “religion:”

Science is about explanation. Religion is about meaning. Science analyses, religion integrates. Science breaks things down to their component parts. Religion binds people together in relationships of trust. Science tells us what is. Religion tells

²⁸ Sacks, *Morality*, p. 137.

²⁹ Sacks, *Morality*, p. 138

³⁰ *Morality*, p. 139.

us what ought to be. Science describes. Religion beckons, summons, calls. Science sees objects. Religion speaks to us as subject. Science practices detachment. Religion is the art of attachment, self to self, soul to soul. Science sees the underlying order of the physical world. Religion hears the music beneath the noise. Science is the conquest of ignorance. Religion is the redemption of solitude.³¹

By delineating the differences between “science” and “religion,” Rabbi Sacks recognizes diverse paths. Unlike either Maimonides in the 12th century or the *Torah U-Madda* branch of Modern Orthodoxy today, Rabbi Sacks is not interested in translating the language of “religion” into the language of “philosophy” or “science.”³² Instead, he wants us to appreciate the difference between them: “science” belongs to the physical world; religion belongs to the moral world; science describes what is, religion prescribes what ought to be; science is about the universal, religion is about the particular; science is analytical and cognitive, religion is emotional and embodied; science is about necessity, religion is about freedom.

Given this clear differentiation between “science” and “religion,” did Rabbi Sacks share the views of Stephen Jay Gould for whom science and religion are “non-overlapping magisteria,” known in the acronym NOMA?³³ I do not think so. Rabbi Sacks did not endorse the independence of religion and science from each other because such view render people

³¹ Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 6.

³² *Torah U-Madda* (Torah and Science) is the 20th century variant of Hirsch’s *Torah im Derekh Eretz*. It was promoted primarily by Yeshivah University in New York, and it was theorized systematically by Rabbi Norman Lamm (d. 2020), the third president of Yeshivah University. See Norman Lamm, *Torah Umadda: The Encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1990). In 1989 Rabbi Lamm established the *Journal of Torah U-Madda* which was first edited by Rabbi J.J. Schachter and later by Professor David Shatz. The *Journal of Torah U-Madda* has been the major venue for the Orthodox commitment to integrate traditional Judaism and general knowledge, but the project has been perpetually contested within the Orthodox world. See David Shatz, “The Practical Endeavor and the Torah u-Madda Debate,” *The Torah U-Maddah Journal* 3 (1991-1992): 98-149. Rabbi Sacks reviewed Rabbi Lamm’s book in his essay “Torah Umadda: The Unwritten Chapter,” published first in *L’Eilah: Jews’ College Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 (1990): 10-15. The essay was reprinted in the second edition of Rabbi Lamm, *Torah Umadda* (Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2010) and posthumously in *Tradition: The Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 53 (3) 2021: 195-205 in honor of the 20th anniversary of Lamm’s *Torah Umadda*. The essay makes clear that although Rabbi Sacks was most respectful of Rabbi Lamm, Rabbi Sacks was also critical of Lamm’s version of *Torah Umadda*. In retrospect, the numerous publications of Rabbi Sacks could be viewed as the articulation of what in 1990 was still “the unwritten chapter” of *Torah Umadda*. On Rabbi Sacks’ critical engagement of *Torah U-Madda* movement see Erica Brown, “Madda or Hokhmah? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on the Integration of Torah and General Wisdom,” *Lehrhaus* March 27, 2022, available at <https://thelehrause.com>.

³³ Stephen Jay Gould, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria,” *Natural History* 106 (1997): 16-22 and 60-62.

bifurcated.³⁴ One cannot and should not have a split personality, rigidly differentiating between being a scientist in the lab and being a Jew at home, as Gould's theory of independence suggests. For Sacks, religion is a mode of being that cannot be privatized because to create the "Kingdom of God" on Earth necessarily pertains to the public sphere, to social and political life. The religious way of life, its rituals, moral norms, and practices is experienced in the public sphere no less than science with its pursuit of truth, code of conduct, and social practices. For Rabbi Sacks, then, between "science" and "religion" there is not just a partial "overlap" but rather a "partnership" of collaboration, cooperation, and mutual respect; in this "partnership" both partners retain their distinctive identity, protecting "the dignity of difference."

How does the "great partnership" of science and religion work? Before addressing this question, I must note that Rabbi Sacks' contribution to the discourse on science and religion is not self-evident. He only wrote one book that directly addresses the issue; he did not publish in the major journals on science and religion; he did not engage the major contributors to the discipline of science and religion (e.g., Ian Barbour, Philip Clayton, Robert Russell, Ted Peters, Alistair E. McGrath, and many others), and he did not refer to historians of science (e.g., John Hedley Brooks, David Livingstone, Ronald Numbers, Michael Ruse, Peter Harrison, among others).³⁵ Nonetheless, I maintain that Rabbi Sacks' reflections on the "great partnership" between science and religion were profound precisely because, as the Templeton Prize already noted, human beings cannot live meaningfully with only one of these frameworks; humans need both science and religion.

Despite his penchant for the "drama of ideas" as a heuristic device, Rabbi Sacks repeatedly states that his approach is one of "both/and" rather than "either/or." In terms of the relationship between science and religion that means that Rabbi Sacks rejected the so-called "conflict model" of science and religion which prevailed in the West especially after the

³⁴ The "independence" of religion and science was endorsed by many Jewish scientists in Western countries during first half of the 20th century because science promised Jewish integration into society and social mobility. See Noah J. Efron, *A Chosen Calling: Jews in Science in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

³⁵ For useful overviews of the academic field of science and religion consult Michael Stenmark, *How to Relate Science and Religion: A Multidimensional Model* (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge UK: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004); Holmes Rolston III, *Science & Religion: A Critical Survey* (Philadelphia and London: The John Templeton Press, 2006); Peter Harrison (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Phillip Clayton, *Religion and Science: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2011, 2nd ed. 2018); Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

1870s.³⁶ Instead, he offers an integrationist model in which science and religion enrich each other but without losing their difference. How? The key is the monotheistic doctrine of creation which all three Abrahamic traditions accept as the point of departure. As Creator, God is radically transcendent to the world of nature he created, and in the act of creation lies freedom: the freedom of God from nature and the freedom of human, who is created in the image of God, from material necessity. The “both/and” approach to the relationship between religion and science means that Rabbi Sacks insists on transcendence and immanence, on freedom and necessity, on meaning and truth, on eternity and historicity, on reason and emotion, on theory and praxis. Employing arguments and findings from various academic disciplines (e.g., philosophy, ethics, psychology, sociology, political theory, and economics), Rabbi Sacks gives us a rich and nuanced understanding of the human condition precisely because he correctly realized that science alone is incomplete.

To appreciate the depth and merit of the “great partnership” of science and religion, we need to consider what Rabbi Sacks rejects. He positions himself as a critic of secularism, scientism, reductionist materialism, hedonism, atheism, and technological determinism. All of these “isms,” which have dominated modern and public discourses, are wrong because in one way or another they either ignore or deny freedom: the freedom to believe, the freedom to be different, the freedom to choose, the freedom to love, the freedom to share, the freedom to care, and even the freedom to err.

The three monotheistic traditions assure and protect these freedoms precisely because they argue for divine transcendence that resists reductionist materialism. The transcendental God is the foundation of human freedom without which we cannot live meaningfully, we cannot resist authoritarian regimes, and we cannot dream, hope, or aspire for anything. Yes, science as a systematic pursuit of truth about the physical world is necessary because it explains “what” things are and “how” they work. But science does not and cannot answer the question that only human beings ask, “why.” Science cannot provide meaning because that lies beyond the capacity and the scope of science. Since human beings are meaning seeking animals, they cannot live with science alone as much as human beings cannot live “by bread alone” (Deut. 8:3). To be fully human, human beings need the partnership of science and religion.

³⁶ On the so called “conflict model” of science and religion in relations to the other models see Alistair E. McGrath, *Science and Religion: A New Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2020 [2010]). Cf., Tirosh-Samuelson, “Rethinking the Past and Anticipating the Future of Science and Religion,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 40 (2005): 33-42.

While freedom and the quest for meaning lie at the heart of being human, freedom always comes with responsibility, namely, the ability of the “I” to respond to the Other who is different from the “I.” The “I” is not an isolated island, a self-centered being, driven by material forces such as selfish genes that code the chemistry of life. Rather, the “I” is aware of Others (both other minds and other bodies) and the identity of the “I” emerges only through interaction with other humans. The response to the Other, Sacks says with a nod to Martin Buber, Hans Jonas, and Emmanuel Levinas,³⁷ breaks the loneliness of the “I” to create a “We,” namely, community or civil society. In all human societies, religion (rather than science) is the force that facilitates “love, trust, family, community ... sacred duty, forgiveness, atonement, gratitude, prayer,” all of which “work whether you believe in it or not.”³⁸ The evidence that religion actually works, namely, that religion contributes to human well-being, longevity, and orderly society actually comes from the social sciences, especially psychology, sociology, and economics. Rabbi Sacks cites the studies of social scientists who gave rise to Positive Psychology, Happiness Studies, and the Science of Subjective Well-Being (e.g., Martin Seligman, Ed Diener, Jonathan Haidt, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, and Richard Layard, among others).³⁹ Science, then, does recognize the social power of religion, and science provides empirical evidence of the emotional and social benefits of religion. And yet, religious life is not exhausted by the scientific evidence about its efficacy.

The integration of science and religion articulated by Rabbi Sacks characterizes the post-secular moment. In the first half of the 20th century, the Secularization Thesis and its concomitant so-called conflict model of science and religion dominated Western culture, especially in the academy. Accordingly, the modern world was seen as necessarily and irreversibly secular, and religion was judged as that aspect of human life that must be relegated to the private, domestic sphere. Since the 1980s that paradigm has been proven

³⁷ In *Morality*, Sacks cites Buber on pp. 57-58, 70, 217, 305 and he cites Levinas on p. 58. Sacks refers to Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985) in *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 32 and in *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*, p. 7.

³⁸ Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 15.

³⁹ The relevant literature is too vast to be cited here. Key texts include Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (2002); idem, *Flourish: Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: Atria Books, 2011); Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (New York: Penguin Press); Robert Biswas-Diener and Ed Diener, *Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth* (Oxford, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Ed Diener, *The Science of Well-being: The Collected Works of Ed Diener*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2009); Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life you Want* (New York: Penguin, 2007); idem, *The Myths of Happiness: What Should Make You Happy but Doesn't, What Shouldn't Make You Happy, But Does* (New York: Penguin, 2013). Rabbi Sacks' engagement with Positive Psychology and the new science of happiness is most evident in his latest work, *Morality*.

inadequate: not only has religion failed to disappear all over the world, but religion has also demanded to be recognized in the public sphere. That is the gist of post-secularism, a term coined by John Richard Neuhaus in 1982 but popularized by Jürgen Habermas especially after 9/11.⁴⁰

Rabbi Sacks is a Jewish post-secular thinker who makes that very claim in the name of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Religion cannot and should not be domesticated and privatized; it should concern itself with the most difficult issues of our time (e.g., biotechnology, environmental decline, breakdown of the family, drug abuse, violence, migration, globalization, and numerous other issues). On all these contested issues, science provides necessary information and knowledge without which we cannot make intelligent decisions, but on all these issues science needs to be complemented by religion since only its wisdom addresses our search for meaning. The “great partnership” of science and religion assures us against falling into reductionists materialism as much as it protects us against fanatic dogmatism. If are committed to the partnership of science and religion we cultivate tolerance, we accept diversity, and we protect pluralism. In the post-secular world, both religion and science must be present in the public sphere, and they must learn how to converse with each other with dignity and respect.

3. Reframing the Relations of Science and Religion

Having presented Rabbi Sacks as a post-secular thinker who linked religious pluralism to the partnership of science and religion, let me now turn to the third and last part of my comments, explaining how Rabbi Sacks sought to reframe the history of the discourse of the science and religion in Western culture. He did so, I suggest, as an intellectual historian who retold the history of Western culture anew because he insisted that the Hebrew Bible should be understood on its own terms rather than through the prism of Pauline Christianity. Here lies the connection between Rabbi Sacks’ numerous semi-academic publications directed to the general reader and his massive Torah commentaries, intended primarily for Jewish readers. Let me explain.

Rabbi Sacks was fully aware of biblical criticism that situated the Hebrew Bible in the cultural context of the ancient Near East. Yet for Sacks, the Hebrew Bible was not a product of the ancient world, but rather a rebellion against the deepest beliefs that prevailed in the

⁴⁰ On the meaning of post-secularism and its relevance to science and religion see Hava Tirosh-Samuels, “Religion, Science, and Technology in the Post-Secular Age: The Case of Trans/Posthumanism,” *Philosophy, Theology, and the Sciences* 4 (1) (2017): 7-45 and the vast literature cited there.

ancient world. That rebellion was biblical monotheism, the radical discovery of “a God beyond the world.”⁴¹ The word ‘discover’ is crucial here, since it is precisely the term that scientists used to describe their own findings about objective reality. Divine transcendence, then, is not a social construct or a fanciful religious imaginary; it is a description of the reality of God. “Divine transcendence alone,” Sacks makes clear, “has the power to redeem life from tragedy and meaninglessness.”⁴² In the worldview of the ancient Greeks, Rabbi Sacks argues, gods mythically represented natural forces that control human life. In that world, there was no freedom, but only tragedy, due to the inevitable conflict between inherently antagonistic forces. When the Hebrew Bible *discovered* divine transcendence, it liberated people from the tragic view of life, best explicated by Nietzsche’s notion of “eternal recurrence.”⁴³ The Hebrew Bible gave humanity the ability to hope, to imagine a future, to aspire to live meaningful life, which was not possible in the Greek view of life. Transcendence is necessary for meaningful life, because “the meaning of a system lies outside the system”.⁴⁴ Thus, Sacks asserts,

“the discovery of Abrahamic monotheism, which transformed the human condition, endowing it with meaning and thereby rescuing it from tragedy in the name of hope, for if God created the physical universe, then God is free, and if God made us in his image, we are free. If we are free, then history is not a matter of eternal recurrence. Because we can change ourselves, we can change the world, that is the religious basis of hope.”⁴⁵

Divine transcendence is the foundation of human subjectivity, human creativity, and human independence and interdependence. But Sacks goes further to explain that the originality of the Bible, cannot be separated from the orthography of the Hebrew language: Hebrew is written from right to left, reflecting the privileging of the right hemisphere of the brain, whereas the Greek language is written from left to right, privileging the left hemisphere of the brain.⁴⁶ Cognitive scientists have clarified the differences between the right and left

⁴¹ Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 29.

⁴² Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 29.

⁴³ Sacks regards Nietzsche as the “the most important progenitor of the postmodern world,” who overthrew “the whole conception of morality as it had been understood throughout the history of Christianity,” see Sacks, *Morality*, p. 79-80. Sacks had to wrestle with the legacy of Nietzsche since Bernard Williams, Sacks’ atheist philosophy teacher at Cambridge, reached similar conclusions to Nietzsche’s.

⁴⁴ Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 37.

⁴⁵ Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 37.

⁴⁶ See Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, pp. 39-71

hemispheres: the left hemisphere is associated with analysis, abstract thinking, and logical explanation, the right hemisphere is responsible for creativity, imagination, interpretation, emotional bonding, and construction of meaning. The two hemispheres of the brain yielded two divergent civilizations – the Greek (“Athens”) and the Hebraic (“Jerusalem”) – the former written from left to right, the latter written from right to left.⁴⁷ Greek culture gave us “science” and Hebraic culture gave us “religion,” but it was Christianity that fused the two. Christianity articulated the fusion of science and religion but quite problematically according to Sacks it also translated the Hebraic religious world view written from right to left into the Greek worldview, written from left to right. By paying attention to orthography, Rabbi Sacks offered both a scientific explanation for the necessity of the partnership between science and religion as well as a new reading of the history of the synthesis of science and religion.

Western culture is thus a synthesis of “Athens” and “Jerusalem” that translated “faith, hope, charity, righteousness, love forgiveness, dignity of the human person and the sanctity of life” into the language of systematic theology in which philosophy explicates religion beliefs, values, and norms.⁴⁸ The Christian synthesis articulated the “great partnership of science and religion” which has prevailed in Western culture for seventeenth centuries, yielding magnificent cultural accomplishments in philosophy, theology, and the arts. Rabbi Sacks acknowledges that the Christian synthesis “was a wondrous achievement, a cathedral of the mind. It brought together the Judaic love of God and the Hellenistic love of nature and human reason.”⁴⁹ It led to articulating the philosophic proofs of God’s existence of God, to Scholasticism, and to systematic theology. But that magnificent achievement began to fall apart in the 17th century with the Scientific Revolution and its aftermath, the secularization of West that has given us the philosophies of Hume, Kant, Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud and all secular and secularized inquiries based on their insights. The corrosion or dissolution of the “great partnership” gave us the modern secular world in which religion is privatized, ridiculed, or marginalized, religion and science are presumed to be necessarily in conflict with

⁴⁷ The difference between the direction of Hebrew and Latin along with other grammatical peculiarities of the two language was a common trope in Jewish-Christian polemics during the Middle Ages and the early-modern period. See Daniel Stein Kokin, “Polemical Language: Hebrew and Latin in Medieval and Early Modern Jewish-Christian Debate,” *Jewish History* 29 (2015): 1-38. As much as Rabbi Sacks was apparently unaware of the debate about the directionality of language, Professor Kokin was unaware of Rabbi Sacks’ reflections in the context of contemporary cognitive science.

⁴⁸ Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 62.

⁴⁹ Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 65.

each other, and society is bereft of the common good, as the culture of the “I” prevails over the culture of “We.”⁵⁰

It is the modern breakdown of the great partnership that Sacks laments and wishes to restore, but in a Judaic way rather than in a Christian way. How can that be accomplished? By returning to the Hebrew Bible and learning how to read it anew as a narrative about the human condition, about freedom, responsibility, justice, character, relationality, hope, open-ended future, and choice. All these values are expressed through the narratives and laws of the Hebrew Bible that resist philosophical and/or scientific generalizations but that their meaning is encountered through perpetual rereading of the biblical text, week after week, year after year, generation after generation.

How does the encounter with the Hebrew Bible help us reframe the integration of science and religion? The key lies in renouncing the lens of Pauline Christianity as elaborated by theologians such as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and their numerous intellectual heirs and encountering the Hebrew Bible with fresh eyes, reading it on its own terms. That, I believe, was the purpose of Rabbi Sacks’ massive hermeneutical project, *Covenant and Conversation: The Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*, consisting of the five volumes on the Pentateuch, and two other volumes in which the interpretation of the Torah weekly portions was organized around a thematic thread, *Lessons in Leadership*,⁵¹ and *Studies in Spirituality*.⁵² His eloquent, highly accessible, and well-crafted short essays, rather than a linear commentary, Rabbi Sacks teased out the message of the biblical text by encountering the literary, psychological, and existential depth of the biblical text by unpacking the richness of the biblical text.

What happens when we read the Bible as Rabbi Sacks teaches us to do? First, we learn that religious knowledge (*da`at*) is not philosophical but relational; it is about love, intimacy, and interaction. Second, we learn that the Bible is not to be read allegorically as harboring philosophic truths, esoterically and exoterically, as Christians have done. Instead, we learn how to encounter the particularity of the human conditions through confronting emotions, relations and imagination and experiencing the situation existentially. Third, we learn to privilege holistic thinking (i.e., right-brain thinking) characteristic of religion over analytic

⁵⁰ This is the core message of Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*. I elaborated on this message in my talk, “Rabbi Sacks: A Post-Secular Political Theologian,” delivered at “Rabbi, Professor, Lord: Conference in Honour of Jonathan Sacks,” on January 17, 2023, at Bar Ilan University in Israel.

⁵¹ See Jonathan Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers; Milford CT: Maggid Books and The Orthodox Union Press, 2015).

⁵² See Jonathan Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers; Milford CT: Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union Press, 2021).

thinking (i.e., left-brain thinking) characteristic of science. In so doing, fourth, we learn to appreciate the relationality, love, and responsibility that the “we,” namely, the covenantal community, over the “I”, the atomistic, self-absorbed, lonely individual. By reimagining ourselves as members of the covenantal community we gain faith (which for Sacks means, trust and hope in an open future). As members of community of readers that stand in an ongoing interpretative relationship with each other and with God, the source of the hermeneutical activity, we learn to appreciate the depth and necessity of existentially meaningful narratives. Put differently, meaning cannot be theorized, it can only be encountered and experienced. Therefore, the Hebrew Bible is more akin to art and literature than to science and philosophy.

With this in mind, we can understand why Rabbi Sacks insisted that encountering the Bible anew may help address the social malaise of contemporary society. By restoring the objectivity of God’s existence as transcendent Creator he shows how it anchors human freedom and why it can help us reject reductionist materialism that characterize scientism. By highlighting the shared ground among the Abrahamic traditions, he ensures their ability to communicate with each other, despite their diversity. And by reading the Bible on its own terms, he redirects our attention “down-to-earth” concerns, namely, to our social reality in the here and now, rather than in the eschatological future. As a post-secular thinker, by restoring the appropriate relationship between religion and science (i.e., “the great partnership”), Rabbi Sacks offers a Judaic reformulation of biblical monotheism that validates the necessity of both science and religion, while retaining their “dignity of difference.”

Conclusion

If I got Rabbi Sacks correctly, the “great partnership” between religion and science should be neither Pauline Christianity’s fusion of “Athens” and “Jerusalem” as interpreted by medieval and early modern Christian theologians, nor Maimonides’ fusion of Torah and science and interpreted by the modern *Torah U-Madda* movement. The “great partnership” he envisions is that of Yehuda Halevi (d. ca. 1140), the physician who was familiar with the science and philosophy of his day but who insisted on their inherent limitations and their need to be complemented by revealed religion.⁵³ To live truthfully and meaningfully, human beings need both religion and science, while remembering their differences and avoiding reducing one to

⁵³ See Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 193; Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 79. Why Judah Halevi rather than Moses Maimonides inspired Rabbi Sacks requires a separate essay.

the other. This, I maintain, is what Rabbi Sacks meant when he defined his life's project as "universalizing particularity:" the particularistic Judaic tradition offers all of humanity a way to live truthfully and meaningfully as experienced in the particularities of Jewish religious life. The insights of Judaism can and should be shared by the other two Abrahamic traditions, although each tradition will experience them on its own terms reflecting its cultural particularity and historical heritage. While defending the dignity of difference and recognizing religious plurality and diversity, Rabbi Sacks articulated a distinctly Judaic vision for the integration of religion and science. Although his integrationist model is not immune to criticism, and many will not be able to endorse it, I do think that he insightfully identified the challenges of our day while articulating a distinctly Judaic response to them.

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