

A Call for Re-Moralization

*Restoring one of the keystones
of Western civilization.*

BY NORMAN A. BAILEY

A review of

Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times by Jonathan Sacks, Hodder & Stoughton, 2020

Even before coronavirus made everything worse, there has been a palpable sense that since the late 1960s, or let's say from Kent State to Minneapolis, the Judeo-Christian moral and the Greco-Roman civil underpinnings of Western civilization have been rapidly disintegrating. What had become since the fifteenth century the dominant social/political/economic paradigm was being increasingly questioned and often discarded as representing and justifying a civilization that was created and sustained by colonialism and slavery.

All the pillars of Western society were undermined, as well as some which predated Western society by millennia, such as the family. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of the Commonwealth, has published a work which examines this process from the standpoint of the collapse of morality, that is, the predominance of the "we" over the "I," now rapidly being inverted. In so doing, Sacks has written nothing short of a masterpiece, a work of masterful analysis, synthesis, diagnosis, prognosis, and prescription, all written with his habitual grace and clarity. He sets the tone from the first page: "If we focus on the 'I' and lose the 'we', if we act in self-interest and lose the common good, if we focus on self-esteem and lose our care for others, we will lose much else. Nations will cease

to have societies and instead have identity groups. We will lose our feeling of collective responsibility and find in its place a culture of competitive victimhood. In an age of unprecedented possibilities, people will feel vulnerable and alone."

Much of the efforts of the great Western thinkers of the past six centuries have been directed toward prescribing for the state and the economy for the benefit of society as a whole, and not just for certain segments of it. Centered particularly in England, Scotland, and eventually America, the great traditions of Judeo-Christian morality and Greco-Roman civil society were applied to contemporary societies. The gradual spread of the market economy and political democracy throughout the Western world and eventually far beyond it characterized what became the universal paradigm: often partial, often perverted, often caricatured, to be sure, but still, what "men and women of good will" worked towards.

Sacks inventories the "decline of the west" into various categories: the perversion of politics and economics into a vicious cycle of domination by unbridled greed and thirst for wealth and power; the decline of the traditional family and classical education; the decline of reasoned

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political discourse; the death of civility, and the substitution of “contract” for “covenant.” He then postulates the necessity of reestablishing a shared moral code, based on religion, for the survival of civilization as humankind has come to know it.

“Markets were made to serve us, we were not made to serve markets.” Economics without ethics has led to a social structure of increasingly concentrated wealth and the unbridled pursuit of greed without let or hindrance. Not everything can be reduced to commercial contracts: “Marriage is not a transaction.

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Parenthood is not a form of ownership. Universities are not intellectual vending machines. Healthcare is distinct from wealth care. Neighborhoods should not be gilded ghettos. Politics should not be a form of power for sale.” According to Sacks, the state has become little more than a marketplace of goods and services, as well as graft and corruption, distributed by naked power divorced from any ethical or moral system. “The state can deliver much.... But it cannot deliver the active citizenship that creates, daily, in myriad local contexts, the face-to-face care and compassion that constitute the good society.”

The two supreme socializing institutions, the family and the schools and universities, are losing their traditional roles and either disappearing or taking on functions quite the opposite of their socializing roles. “... [M]arriage is fundamental to the moral enterprise because it is the supreme example of the transformation of two ‘I’s’ into a collective ‘we’.” Universities are losing their function of reasoned intellectual discourse leading to the increase in human knowledge and taking on the role of disseminators and inculcators of “correct” thought and speech. “Democracy in and of itself is no guarantor of freedom of thought or speech. That is why academic freedom is so important—and that means freedom for all, equally.”

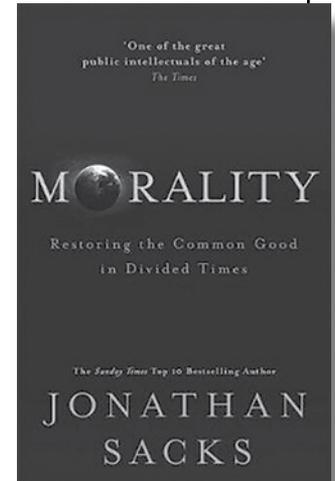
Politics is becoming a cockpit or a bullring, and about as civilized as cock-fighting or bullfighting. Political discourse is becoming reduced to yelling and calling names. The modern version of “populism” is gaining ground everywhere, coupled with demonstrations and rioting.

All this is enhanced by the decline of personal contact due to modern communications technology: “To be fully human, we need direct encounters with other human beings. ... That is how we become moral beings. That is how we learn to think as ‘we’. This cannot be done electronically.”

This is all part of the decline of civility in general, as well as social trust leading to consensus on a political process and a market economy marked by a covenant among individuals and groups, not just commercial or social contracts. “The manipulative use of social media in the interests of... wealth and power, has led us directly into a post-truth era in which trust in public institutions is at an all-time low.”

What can be done about this? According to Sacks, all men and women of good will who believe in the basic principles of Western civilization must unite to combat the forces of social anomie which are currently dominant. This means a return to the teachings of morality and civility upon which Western society was based, the greatest in the history of humanity, because it exalted the human being above any and all other considerations. Because it created a covenant among those born into it; to be sure, a covenant often violated and threatened by internal and external hostile forces, but in the end triumphant. The founder and publisher of this journal will be remembered as beginning the process of re-moralization that Rabbi Sacks describes with the movie *Stars and Strife*. Both Sacks and Smick are fighting the good fight—frankly, the only one worth fighting. ◆

To the dismay of his myriad of admirers, Rabbi Sacks unexpectedly passed away after the writing of this review of his last book. May he rest in peace.



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