

## Book Review by John Littleton.

Jonathan Sacks, *Morality Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (London: Hodder, 2021). First published by Hodder & Stoughton in 2020. This paperback edition with a new foreword by Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury published 2021. Pages 367. \$22.99.

Life in our society during and after the pandemic is a theme at the heart of this excellent book. Renewing the life of society towards the common good is the intention. In *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* Jonathan Sacks makes a strong case for a “Cultural Climate Change” in public morality within the liberal democracies of the West.

The reader is kept up to date with the trends, attitudes and behaviours in Western society and receives the author’s wisdom on the way as the pages turn. The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks lived an extraordinarily reflective life.<sup>1</sup> The gems of his wisdom brighten each chapter and provide an ethically intelligent guide for the reader.

The central theme is that “we have had for some time now too much ‘I’, too little ‘We’; too much pursuit of self, too little commitment to the common good” (337). Applied to our post-Covid future this means that we need to be guided by a sense of “‘We are all in this together’ rather than ‘What is in it for me?’”, and to “enhance the structures of our togetherness, a togetherness that had been weakened by too much pursuit of self” (338, 341).

The scope of this book is breathtaking. Sacks wrote about the liberal democracies in Britain, Europe and the United States from the 1960’s onwards, but his commentary resonates with Australian liberal democracy during that period. For the reviewer, born in the 1941, the book reads like a retrospective, recounting and tracking the various aspects of a major cultural shift that happened during his lifetime in Australia. Reading the overall description of that period written in hindsight by the author enhances understanding and appreciation.

Sacks presents a big picture. He traces the history of a paradigm shift which began in the 1960’s, when the culture moved from “we” to an emphasis on “me”. He argues that the morality of the market economic forces is inadequate as it focusses on gain and wealth. The morality of politics focusses on power and division.

A third element of morality recognises a commitment to the common good, a love of neighbour, the stranger, the poor and needy; where there is “a concern for the welfare of others, an active commitment to justice and compassion, a willingness to ask not just what is good for me but what is good for all-of-us-together. It is about ‘Us’, not ‘Me’; about ‘We’ not ‘I’” (xi ,1, 20-21, 310, 322-323). He is convinced that cultures can change and move from an ‘I’ to a ‘We’ culture (321) and so he outlines five essential “We” dimensions for our post-Covid future in the twenty-first century (340-341).

The relatively short chapters are eye-opening, and the author’s conversational writing style helps to inform, form, and transform the reader’s viewpoints on moral issues. Sample chapter headings for Part One are: Unsocial Media, The Fragile Family; Part Two: Markets Without Morals, Identity Politics; Part Three: Post-Truth, Two Ways of Arguing, The Death of

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Lord Jonathon Sacks died in November 2020. He served as Chief Rabbi of the UK and the Commonwealth 1991-2013. He was an award-winning author, a philosopher, an international religious leader, a respected moral voice, and a speaker at Lambeth Conferences of the Anglican Communion.

Civility; Part Four: Human Dignity, Which Morality? Part Five: Morality Matters, From ‘I’ to ‘We’; Epilogue.

The depth of analysis in this book is impressive. Sacks delves into many key issues relevant to a conversation about public morality in Australia today. He uses research data and examples from the immense literature on the subject; literature mentioned in the Notes and Further Reading sections (342-367). He describes “four broad types of moral tradition: civic ethics, the ethics of duty, codes of honour and the morality of love” (277-283). The ethic of love, which is familiar to those in the West derives from the Bible, Judaism and Christianity. Sacks addresses many other topics: polarisation of attitudes and the difficulty of reasoning together (231), the dignity of dissent (199), the benefits of altruism and the value of religion (298-303), for example.

In a very helpful manner Sacks draws attention to the distinction between contracts and covenants (64, 325-327, 333-336). “A contract is a transaction” and about interests. “A covenant is a relationship” and about mutual trust and responsibilities. “Covenantal thinking” provides a way towards a “We” society (327). The author wrote “Contracts invite us to think about what we can gain. Covenants ask us to think about the impact we have on others” (327). He applies covenantal thinking to the worlds of business, the market, economics, and politics (327-336). Covenantal thinking applies to the Christian community too.

*Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* is an essential reference for disciples and followers of Jesus: everyday disciples, local leaders, deacons, priests, and bishops who are serious readers and value intentional theological reflection. Discipleship involves keeping abreast of moral issues in society.

The author creates a language of discourse (“We” and an “I” terminology) to inform theological reflection and provides the reader with considered and wise ethical viewpoints about social and cultural issues. Sacks writes in a gentle, objective, clear and open manner that informs but leaves the reader free to agree or respectfully disagree and make up their own mind.

Writing in the Foreword, Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury calls the book “a masterpiece”.

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