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Review: Jonathan Sacks, *The Power of Ideas: Words of Faith and Wisdom* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2021).

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The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (1948-2020; Ph.D., University of London, 1982) was a respected conservative English Jewish leader and a prolific public intellectual whose many learned books and multi-media commentaries gained for him an international following. The essay collection *The Power of Ideas: Words of Faith and Wisdom* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2021) brings together a wide-ranging sampling of 91 selections of his learned writings over the years 1981 to 2020, grouped together in five chronologically arranged parts.

I first learned about Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' work when I read the self-styled conservative American columnist David Brooks' review of his book *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (2015) in his column titled "Finding Peace Within Holy Texts" in the *New York Times* (dated November 17, 2015).

In Rabbi Sacks' 2015 book *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, which does not include an "Index," he indicates in a comprehensive endnote to Chapter 9 (p. 282) that he is familiar with a broad range of studies of the phonetic alphabet, including Robert K. Logan's book *The Alphabet Effect: A Media Ecology Understanding of the Making of Western Civilization* (2004), and "Walter J. Ong's masterly and suggestive works, *The Presence of the*

Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History [1967] and *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* [1982].”¹

Now, in 2003, Rabbi Sacks delivered the Sir Isaiah Berlin Memorial Lecture in London. His lecture is published in his 2021 essay collection as “On Freedom” (pp. 279-294). In it, he reports that Sir Isaiah Berlin’s “literary executor, Henry Hardy, [selected] as the title of one of the volumes of his collected essays [the title] *The Power of Ideas* [2000]” (p. 281).

Yes, in Rabbi Sacks’ 2021 essay collection *The Power of Ideas*, he does refer to David Brooks (pp. 54 and 208). I’d not be surprised if the two of them had met one another.

Rabbi Sacks was well known among American conservatives such as the readers of the *Wall Street Journal* (2011, pp. 139-144; and 2014, pp. 162-164) and the magazine *First Things* (1998, pp. 226-244; 2013, pp. 315-330; and 2015, pp. 168-170). However, he also published the article “The Moral Animal” in the *New York Times* (2012, pp. 153-155).

Nevertheless, Rabbi Sacks does not even mention Donald J. Trump by name even once in the 91 selections in this 2021 360-page essay collection. Why not? (Rabbi Sacks may have discussed Trump elsewhere – in a selection not chosen to be reprinted in the 2021 essay collection.)

In any event, the five parts of Rabbi Sacks’ posthumously published essay collection are as follows: Part One: “Thought for the Day” (27 selections; pp. 1-56); Part Two: “Credo” (25 selections; pp. 57-129); Part Three: “Articles” (14 selections; pp. 130-181); Part Four: “The House of Lords” (10 selections; pp. 183-210); and Part Five: “Speeches and Lectures” (15

selections ; pp. 211-361).

The "Foreword" (p. xi) is by His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, now King Charles III (born in 1948; reigned 2022-). The "Introduction: A Polymath of Our Age Who guides Us Still" (pp. xiii-xviii) is by Henry Grunwald OBE, QC (born in 1949), Chair of the Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust. No editor is explicitly identified.

In Grunwald's "Introduction," he says the following: "Part One of this collection contains a selection of transcripts from Rabbi Sacks' *Thought for the Day* broadcasts on BBC Radio 4" (p. xiv); "Part Two is a selection of Rabbi Sacks' Credo columns, originally published in *The Times*" (p. xv); "Part Three includes a selection of articles written for a variety of newspapers and publications" (p. xv); "Part Four features a selection of his speeches from the House of Lords" (p. xv); and "Part Five includes a small selection of his many and varied speeches and lectures" (p. xvi). However, Grunwald does not explain why these 91 selections were selected and others excluded. For example, Rabbi Sacks' article "Love, Hate, and Jewish Identity" in the conservative American magazine *First Things* (November 1997) is not included.

The volume is rounded off with a "List of Published Works [Books] by Jonathan Sacks" (pp. 363-364) and an "Index" (pp. 365-379). The "Index" is not thorough (for example, it contains no entry on Ruth Benedict, mentioned below). However, the entry on Biblical references includes sub-entries on each and every book of the Hebrew Bible (pp. 366-367). In addition, the list of his published books now needs to be updated to include not only *The Power of Ideas* (2021), but also *I Believe: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (2022).

In Rabbi Sacks' 2011 essay "Books" in his 2021 essay collection (pp. 113-115), he says, "I have argued that Judaism took the form it did because of one of the great revolutions in information technology, the invention of the alphabet as opposed to the sign-based systems of Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics. To understand those systems, you had to memorize hundreds of symbols, which meant that only a minority could do so. The result was literate elites and hierarchical societies. The first alphabet, Proto-Semitic, which appeared in the Sinai desert some thirty-eight centuries ago, had little more than twenty symbols. For the first time the possibility was born of universal literacy. . . . From the beginning, Judaism became a religion in which education was the fundamental act. . . . The holiest object in Judaism is a book, the Scroll of the Law. The reverence we pay it is astonishing" (pp. 113-114).

For an accessible discussion of the invention of the alphabet, see the American Jesuit Walter J. Ong's book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982, esp. pp. 78-116).

Ong and Rabbi Sacks agree that "the invention of the alphabet" as opposed to other writing systems was "one of the great revolutions in information technology." For Ong, this revolutionary invention of the phonetic alphabetic system of writing in ancient Hebrew and in ancient Greek cultures means that Western culture emerged from a matrix that sets it apart from all other cultures historically – in what Rabbi Sacks refers to as "the grand sweep of history" (p. 348).

I discuss Ong's thought regarding the distinctiveness Western culture and what Rabbi Sacks refers to as "the grand sweep of history," in my article "The West Versus the Rest: Getting Our Cultural Bearings from Walter J. Ong" in the journal *Explorations in Media Ecology* (2008).

In Ong's "Preface" in his 1977 book *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (pp. 9-13), he explicitly spells out his sweeping thesis that is implicit in his earlier books, including, in my estimate, his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse [in Ancient and Medieval Culture] to the Art of Reason [in the Age of Reason]* as follows:

Ong says the following in the first sentence: "The present volume carries forward work in two earlier volumes by the same author, *The Presence of the Word* (1967) and *Rhetoric Romance, and Technology* (1971)" (p. 9). He then discusses these two earlier volumes.

Then he says, "The thesis of these two earlier works is sweeping, but it is not reductionist, as reviewers and commentators, so far as I know, have all generously recognized: the works do not maintain that the evolution from primary orality through writing and print to an electronic culture, which produces secondary orality, causes or explain everything in human culture and consciousness. Rather, the thesis is relationist: major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness are related, often in unexpected intimacy, to the evolution of the word from primary orality to its present state. But the relationships are varied and complex, with cause and effect often difficult to distinguish" (pp. 9-10).

Thus, Ong himself claims (1) that his thesis is "sweeping" but (2) that the shifts do not "cause or explain everything in human culture and consciousness" and (3) that the shifts are related to "major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness."

Major cultural developments include the rise of modern science, the rise of modern capitalism, the rise of representative democracy, the rise of the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of the Romantic Movement in philosophy, literature, and the arts.

Next in Ong's 1977 "Preface," he explains certain lines of investigation that he further develops in *Interfaces of the Word*. Then he says, "At a few points, I refer in passing to the work of French and other European structuralists – variously psychoanalytic, phenomenological, linguistic, or anthropological in cast" (page 10). Ong liked to characterize his own thought as phenomenological and personalist in cast.

However, as I say, Ong is not everybody's cup of tea, figuratively speaking. Consider, for example, Ong's own modesty in the subtitle of his book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (1967), the expanded published version of Ong's 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University. His wording "Some Prolegomena" clearly acknowledges that he does not explicitly claim that his thesis as he formulated it in his 1977 "Preface" does "explain everything in human culture and consciousness" – or every cause -- but that the shifts he points out are "sweeping."

Now, please note just how careful and cagey Ong's wording is when he says that his account of the evolution of certain changes does not "explain everything in human culture and consciousness" – or every cause.

On the one hand, Ong's terminology about primary oral culture (and primary orality, for short; and his earlier terminology about primarily oral culture) is sweeping inasmuch as it refers to all of our pre-historic human ancestors.

On the other hand, his cagey remark about sorting out cause and effect does not automatically rule out the possibility that certain changes somehow contributed to the eventual historical development of writing systems and specifically phonetic alphabetic writing (= literacy) as well as to the historical development of human settlement in agriculture (or agrarian) societies and economies.

Now, in Rabbi Sacks' 1998 essay "Markets and Morals" (pp. 226-244), he says, "Not the least significant of Judaic contributions to the development of Western civilization was its emphasis on, perhaps even invention of, linear time. Ancient cultures tended to think of time as cyclical, seasonal, a matter of eternal recurrences to an original and unchanging nature of things. The Hebrew prophets were the first to see time in a quite different way – as a journey towards a destination, a narrative with a beginning and middle, even if the end (the Messianic society) is always beyond the horizon. It is ultimately to this revolution that we owe the very notion of progress as a historical category, the idea that things are not predestined always to remain what they were. Hope, even more than necessity, is the mother of invention" (p. 236).

Ong critiques cyclic accounts of time in his 1957 book *Frontiers in American Catholicism: Essays on Ideology and Culture* (pp. 54, 83, and 112).²

Now, in Rabbi Sacks' 2014 essay "Shame and Guilt Cultures" (pp. 33-34), he says of "a great anthropologist, Ruth Benedict" that "It was she who taught that distinction between shame cultures like ancient Greece, and guilt cultures like Judaism and Christianity" (p. 33).³

"They both teach people how they ought to behave, but they have very different approaches to wrongdoing. In shame cultures what matters is what other people think of you [= David

Riesman's outer-directed people? Or his contemporary American other-directed people?]: the embarrassment, the ignominy, the loss of face. Whereas in guilt cultures it's what the inner voice of conscience tells you [= Riesman's inner-directed people]. In shame cultures, we're actors playing our part on the public stage. In guilt cultures, we're engaged in inner conversation with the better angels of our nature" (p. 33).

"The biggest difference is that in shame cultures, if we're caught doing wrong, there's a stain on our character that only time can erase. But guilt cultures make a sharp distinction between the doer and the deed, the sinner and the sin. That's why guilt cultures focus on atonement and repentance, apology and forgiveness. The act was wrong, but on our character there's no indelible stain" (pp. 33-34).

David Riesman's terminology is found in his classic study *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950). Rabbi Sacks uses Riesman's terminology (pp. 347 and 348), but without mentioning him by name and without referencing his widely read 1950 book.

Ong discusses David Riesman's three terms – (1) outer-directed (also known as tradition-directed); (2) inner-directed; and (3) other-directed – in his 1957 book *Frontiers in American Catholicism: Essays on Ideology and Culture* (pp. vii and 39), where he critiques Riesman's account of other-directed people in contemporary American culture, because Ong suspects that it contains certain positive potential.

For Ong, what Riesman refers to as inner-directedness gained paramount ascendancy in the print culture that emerged in Europe after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the mid-

1450s – many centuries after inner-directedness had first emerged in ancient Hebrew culture and in ancient Greek culture, after the phonetic alphabet had emerged in them.

On the face of it, Riesman's tradition-directed people (his outer-directed personality types) call to mind the strong emphasis on tradition in the Roman Catholic Church. This, in turn, seems to align his inner-directed personality type with the Protestant Reformation – and, by implication, with the German sociologist Max Weber's famous book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2014). The Protestant Reformation also involved translating the Bible from Latin, the lingua franca of the educated, into vernacular languages such as English and German. The Protestant emphasis on individual interpretation of the Bible also presupposed the ability to read and thus also encouraged the spread of literacy and formal education.

But medieval formal education, before the rise of the Gutenberg printing press in the mid-1450s, had also the spread of literacy, and later, in the Renaissance, the newly formed religious order the Society of Jesus (known informally as the Jesuit order) ran an extensive network of schools. See the American Jesuit church historian John O'Malley's book *The First Jesuits* (1993).

Also stretching back into medieval times was the Roman Catholic practice of sacramental one-to-one confession – which no doubt contributed to what Riesman refers to as inner-directed personality types.

In Ong's 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, mentioned above, he does not refer to Riesman's terminology about inner-directed personality types; instead, he

refers to the inward turn of consciousness (pp. 178-179).

In Ong's 1986 book *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (University of Toronto Press), the published version of his 1981 Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto, Ong takes the liberty of including a number of books in his "References" (pp. 161-172) that he does not explicitly refer to in the text – books that detail, in effect, what Riesman refers to as the inner-directed personality type.

Now, in Rabbi Sacks' 2011 essay "The King James Bible" (pp. 13-14), he commemorates the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible. He says, "What had happened centuries ago, was the invention of a new form of information technology – printing, developed by Gutenberg in Germany and Caxton in England. This suddenly made books cheaper and opened up, to whole populations, knowledge that previously had been the prerogative of an elite" (p. 13).

That knowledge tended to be available to an elite who knew Latin, the lingua franca of Europe for centuries after it had ceased to be a mother tongue and after the vernacular languages had emerged. Even though the New Testament had emerged in antiquity when the Roman Empire was still strong and Latin was still a mother tongue, almost all the texts in the New Testament were written in ancient Greek, not Latin. The Hebrew Bible was, of course, written in ancient Hebrew. However, in the Middle Ages, the Christian Bible had emerged in a standard Latin version.

In England, William Tyndale pioneered translating the Bible into the vernacular. But "Tyndale was arrested and put to death" (p. 13). It remained for King James to convene a learned group

of translators to produce what then became known as the King James Bible in English.

Rabbi Sacks also calls attention to “new information technologies – the internet, smartphones and social networking software” at work today (p. 14). He concludes, “In the beginning was the word, and whether spread by printing or the internet, it still calls us to create the freedom that honors all equally as the image of God” (p. 14).

Ong’s pioneering media ecology study of print technology is his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse [in Ancient and Medieval Culture] to the Art of Reason [in the Age of Reason]*.⁴ It is about the French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572) and the history of the verbal arts of logic (also known as dialectic) and rhetoric.

At Harvard University, Perry Miller in English served as the director of Ong’s massively researched doctoral dissertation. Years earlier, Miller had published his massively researched book *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939), in which he discusses Ramus’ work to the best of his ability (for specific page references to Ramus, see the “Index” [p. 528]).

No doubt the most famous Ramist in the English-speaking world is the English Renaissance poet John Milton (1608-1674). He studied Ramist logic in Latin at Cambridge University. Later in his life, he composed a textbook in Ramist logic in Latin. After he had become famous, he published it in 1672. Ong and Charles J. Ermatinger published a translation of Milton’s textbook in logic in volume eight of Yale’s *Complete Prose Works of John Milton: 1666-1682*, edited by Maurice Kelley (Yale University Press, 1982, pp. 139-407). Ong supplied the

“Introduction” (pp. 144-207). Ong’s “Introduction,” slightly shortened, is reprinted as “Introduction to Milton’s *Logic*” in volume four of Ong’s *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1999, pp. 111-142).

Unfortunately, Rabbi Sacks shows no evidence of being familiar with Miller’s massively researched 1939 book or with Ong’s massively researched 1958 book.⁵ Nevertheless, Rabbi Sacks feels free to endorse Max Weber’s view that Calvinism “in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries transformed Holland, Scotland, England of the Revolution and America of the Pilgrim Fathers” (p. 347) in some magical way that “Max Weber attributes to the spirit of capitalism” (p. 347). (In Rabbi Sacks’ 2021 essay collection *The Power of Ideas*, he, at times, refers in passing to Milton in different connections. However, Milton does not appear in the “Index.”)

Now, in 2016, Rabbi Sacks received the Templeton Prize. His acceptance speech is titled “The Danger of Outsourcing Morality” (pp. 342-349). In it, he says, “There is, though, one form of outsourcing that tends to be little noticed: the outsourcing of *memory*” (p. 343; his italics). Subsequently, he says, “We confused *history* and *memory*, which are not the same thing at all. History is an answer to the question, ‘What happened?’ Memory is an answer to the question, ‘Who am I?’ History is about facts; memory is about identity. History is *his story*. It happened to someone else, not me. Memory is *my story*, the past that made me who I am, of whose legacy I am the guardian for the sake of generations yet to come. Without memory, there is no identity. And without identity, we are mere dust on the surface of infinity” (p. 343; his italics). Subsequently, Rabbi Sacks says, “You can’t outsource conscience. You can’t delegate moral responsibility away. When you do, you raise expectations that cannot be met. And when,

inevitably, they are not met, society becomes freighted with disappointment, anger, fear, resentment and blame. People start to take refuge in magical thinking, which today takes one of four forms: [1] the far right, [2] the far left, [3] religious extremism and [4] aggressive secularism. [1] the far right seeks a return to a golden past that never was. [In the U.S., the far right is represented by Trump voters.] [2] The far left seeks a utopian future that never will be. [3] Religious extremists believe you can bring salvation by terror. [4] Aggressive secularists believe that if you get rid of religion there will be peace. These are all fantasies and pursuing them will endanger the very foundations of freedom” (pp. 345-346).

Now, in reading various books by Rabbi Sacks over the years, I have been impressed with his learning, but I tend to be most intrigued by his readings of the Hebrew Bible. In his posthumously published 2021 essay collection, his 2013 essay “On Creative Minorities” (pp. 315-330) includes a fascinating account of the ancient Hebrew prophet Jeremiah. But Rabbi Sacks’ impetus for discussing Jeremiah (29:5-7) came from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s May 2004 lecture on the Christian roots of Europe (p. 318).

According to Rabbi Sacks, Cardinal Ratzinger concluded that “Christian believers should look upon themselves as just such a creative minority, and help Europe to reclaim what is best in its heritage and to therefore place itself at the service of all humankind” (quoted on p. 318).⁶ In 2005, Joseph Ratzinger (1927-2022) was elected Pope Benedict XVI; in 2013, he resigned as pope. He died on December 31, 2022. May he rest in peace.

In Rabbi Sacks’ 2013 essay “On Creative Minorities,” he also discusses Pope Francis (pp. 328-329). Rabbi Sacks says, “What moved me especially were the words he used in his open letter of 11 September 2013, to Eugenio Scalfari, editor of the Italian newspaper *La*

Repubblica. There he wrote: ‘God never abandoned His covenant with Israel, and notwithstanding their terrible suffering over the centuries, the Jewish people have kept their faith. For this, we will never be sufficiently grateful to them as a Church, but also as human beings.’ This is languages we have rarely heard from a Pope before, and it embodies a truth we all too often forget: that if you are deeply loyal to your faith, you can respect the loyalty with which others stay loyal to theirs” (pp. 328-329; also see p. 169).⁷ Amen.

Incidentally, Rabbi Sacks delivered the address “The Love That Brings New Life into the World” (pp. 331-341) at an international colloquium at the Vatican on 17 November 2014.

Notes

¹ For further discussion of Rabbi Sacks’ 2015 book, see my online review of it titled “Rabbi Jonathan Sacks Confronts Religious Violence” (dated November 22, 2015).

² For an accessible popular discussion of linear time versus cyclic time, see the later Thomas Cahill’s book *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (1998, esp. pp. 5, 64, 126, 127-128, 130-132, 145-146, and 237-239). For Ong, the classic study of the linear time versus cyclic time is Mircea Eliade’s book *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, translated from the French by Willard R. Trask (1954; orig. French ed., 1949).

³ For Ruth Benedict’s terminology, see her classic study *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (1946).

⁴ When Ong refers to as “the Art of Reason,” he is referring not only to Ramus and his followers but also to the prestige philosophical discourse in the Age of Reason (e.g., Descartes). For a discussion of the residual forms of what Ong refers to as “the Art of

Discourse,” see Thomas O. Sloane’s book *On the Contrary: The Protocol of Traditional Rhetoric* (1997).

⁵ For further discussion of Ong’s thought in his massively researched 1958 book *RMDD*, see my somewhat lengthy online article “Walter J. Ong’s Philosophical Thought” (dated September 20, 2020).

⁶ In Rabbi Sacks’ posthumously published 2021 essay collection, no citation is given for the quotation from Cardinal Ratzinger’s May 2004 lecture. His lecture “The Spiritual Roots of Europe: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow” is part of the book, with Marcello Pera, titled *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, translated by Michael F. Moore (Basic Books, 2006, pp. 51-80; the quotation is from p. 80). For further discussion of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, see Matthew Fox’s 2011 book *The Pope’s War: Why Ratzinger’s Secret Crusade Has Imperiled the Church and How It Can Be Saved* (Sterling Ethos).

⁷ For an historical account of the terrible suffering of the Jewish people over the centuries, see James Carroll’s book *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History* (2001). For further discussion of the doctrinally conservative Pope Francis, see Massimo Borghesi’s book *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, translated by Barry Hudock (2021; orig. Italian ed., 2021).

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