Andrew Marr:  
You were the former Chief Rabbi, but some of the most devastating things you say in the earlier part of the book concern the condition of Christians in the Middle East. Can you just take us through how serious and how dramatic what’s happened to Christians in the Middle East and in North Africa?

Rabbi Lord Sacks:  
It has actually been devastating. There were one and a half million Christians in Iraq 15 years ago; today, less than 400,000. In Afghanistan, the last church was burned to the ground in 2010. At the beginning of the 19th Century, Christians were 20 per cent of the population of the Middle East; today, less than 4 per cent and declining rapidly. I call this the religious equivalent of ethnic cleansing.

Andrew Marr:  
It is an astonishing series of figures that you give in the book about this. One of the other very, very remarkable points, which will surprise perhaps a lot of people watching, is that you believe we are on the edge of an age of new, increased religiosity, and that that is kind of unstoppable.

Rabbi Lord Sacks:
Yep.

**Andrew Marr:**
Can you explain why?

**Rabbi Lord Sacks:**
Even if no one is persuaded to become religious, if you just look at birth rates throughout the world, the more religious you are the more children you have. So, just by demographics alone the 21st Century is going to get increasingly religious. But we are seeing, you know, to some extent, some of the failure of the great secular ideologies, and more and more young people turning to religion. The trouble is quite often the religion they are turning to is not a religion of coexistence and conciliation, but a religion of extremism, radicalism and violence.

**Andrew Marr:**
Yes, absolutely. And you compare what’s happening now to the reformation where we had Luther and we had a challenge to the Catholic Church, and, crucially, you argue we had the new technology. A combination.

**Rabbi Lord Sacks:**
Luther was not the first person to put forward his ideas. John Wycliffe did that in Oxford two centuries earlier. What made Luther the herald of change was this revolution in information technology called printing. The result is he could get his message out far more effectively than the existing structures of power. What printing was to Martin Luther, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook have become for Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and, above all, ISIS.

**Andrew Marr:**
And this is changing the terms of trade. You argue in the book, in effect the West is almost powerless before this new challenge.

**Rabbi Lord Sacks:**
I don’t think it is powerless, but I don’t think it has fully realised how significant this is. This new information technology allows hitherto marginal groups to become
global phenomena. And I actually went to Palo Alto to talk to the people who have developed this new technology and asked them about it, and they say the radicals are the world’s best users of this technology and we are lagging behind.

Andrew Marr:
Rather like Luther and the printing press and…

Rabbi Lord Sacks:
Exactly…

Andrew Marr: And in case people think that’s a kind of cozy comparison, let’s remember that the Thirty Years War in Europe was one of the most devastating events in European history before the Second World War. Mass slaughter…

Rabbi Lord Sacks: [Interrupts]… The Thirty Years War killed one in three of the population of central Europe and those wars set in motion by the reformation lasted a century. So, we’re dealing here with a phenomenon that we’ve almost forgotten because the west has become quite secularized. We forget just how long-lasting and how potentially violent it can actually be.

Andrew Marr: So we are facing some kind of apocalypse if we don’t take the right actions. But you argue in this book that religion is the answer. Well, then people say, ‘No, no. Hold on a second. Surely, religion is the problem’.

Rabbi Lord Sacks: Well I show in the book that religion is not the prime cause of violence and war. The most encyclopedic book on wars relates religion to only 10% of them. But what I am saying is wars are won by weapons but peace is won by ideas. So this battle against radical political Islam has to be a war of ideas, not just of weapons. And I’m trying to put a new idea on the table.

Andrew Marr: Why do you think this literalism, which is really what fundamentalism… - a literal belief in the word of God in various forms – has become so popular right now, at the end of this long period of secularization and material development?
Rabbi Lord Sacks: What happens to people who are familiar with the traditional culture is that the 21st century is totally bewildering. You have this Babel of voices, you have change that is almost too rapid to bear, and people want to reduce complexity to simplicity. And that’s when they go back to sacred texts and do that without that whole history of interpretation.

Andrew Marr: And so that gives them a sense of who they are in the world and a community they can rely on.

Rabbi Lord Sacks: Yeah, yeah.

Andrew Marr: You use the phrase in the book, ‘religion both binds and blinds’. So, how do we stop it blinding?

Rabbi Lord Sacks: We stop it blinding, I think – I mean there are all sorts of ways of doing it – but I say if we have a religious problem, then we ought to have a religious answer. It’s not the whole of the answer, but it’s part of it. What I’m trying to show is go back to those texts that actually right at the beginning of the Hebrew bible and they are shared, in one way or another, by Jews, Christians and Muslims – texts about sibling rivalry – and say, ‘let us read them from the perspective of the 21st century’. If you do that, you can see that those narratives are an attempt to get us to see the humanity of the Other – of the one not like me.

Andrew Marr: And so it’s all about interpretation. Now, one of the other things you discuss in the book is the appalling rise of anti-Semitism, particularly across Europe. Now, a lot of that is driven by radical Islamists, of course, as we know. What source of hope do you find when you talk to Muslim colleagues and young Muslims?

Rabbi Lord Sacks: I find among young Muslims – and among young Christians and Jews – a need for some strong religious voice that speaks to the spirit – not just to the physical, kind of material culture that we’re in – but that brings us together instead of splitting us apart. I really have done a lot of teaching now with young Muslims, young Christians and they really resonate to this message; a religious message, but one that
brings us together.

**Andrew Marr:** Finally, what do you say to those people who say, ‘well, that’s all very well, but for all of those people living in Palestine and so forth, who have been farming land for a very, very long time – generation after generation – they are being told by religious Jews you have to go because the Bible has given this land to us, not to you’? That has been a huge source of unhappiness and violence in the Middle East.

**Rabbi Lord Sacks:** This book is very candid about Judaism, as well as Christianity and Islam, and I’m really saying to my fellow Jews: we were brought up with the text that gets us to see the humanity of the Other: ‘love the stranger because you yourself were once strangers’. I think if Israelis try and see the world from Palestinian eyes, Palestinians see the world from Jewish eyes, we would begin to understand one another’s fears. And once you get rid of the politics of fear, you can build a politics of hope.

**Andrew Marr:** Rabbi Sacks, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

**INTERVIEW ENDS.**