

# Plato's Ghost As A Scapegoat For The 'War Of Civilizations'

by Gabriele Liebig

Man does not consider God as something identifiable, to which, if one has discerned it, one gives a name. Thinking longs much more for the Unknown; but since it cannot comprehend it, it calls this unrecognized the One; wherein the idea is expressed, that it is this One, for which reason longs.

— Nicolaus of Cusa

On Nov. 3, an article appeared in the London *Times*, with the title: "Plato Was Wrong. Searching For Universal Truth Threatens Us All." The author, Jonathan Sacks, writes: "It may seem bizarre to suggest a connection between the tragedy of Sept. 11 and a Greek philosopher who lived almost 2,500 years ago, yet that is what I am going to claim. I call it Plato's ghost, and it has haunted the Western imagination ever since."

Sacks is the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of the Commonwealth [of Great Britain], but a Kantian empiricist, or an empiricist Kantian, or a representative of some other religious denomination, could just as well have composed his argument. According to Plato, writes Sacks, "Reality is not the chaotic profusion of things we see, feel, and touch: the thousands of different kinds of chairs, houses, or trees. It lies in what is common to each: the form of a chair, house, or tree. Things are particular; truth is universal. That was Plato's profound idea. I believe it to be profoundly wrong."

Sacks' is a creed common to both Aristotle and the empiricists, served up with a bang: They insist the *thing* takes primacy over the *idea*. According to this ideology, there are really only empirical objects and the difference between them; the idea exists only as an arbitrary abstraction, added later.

## Denying Universal Human Culture

Out of the denial of the idea, the denial of an existing, increasingly intelligible, recognizable truth necessarily follows. The meaning of "true" is reduced to "free of contradiction" and "verifiable." Thus, truth is something that would operate only in science, Sacks believes, but not in religion, and, only in a very limited sense, in morality. Still, the Rabbi leaves in force a few "true moral universals": "the sanctity of human life, the dignity of the human person, and the freedom we need to be true to ourselves while being a blessing to

others."

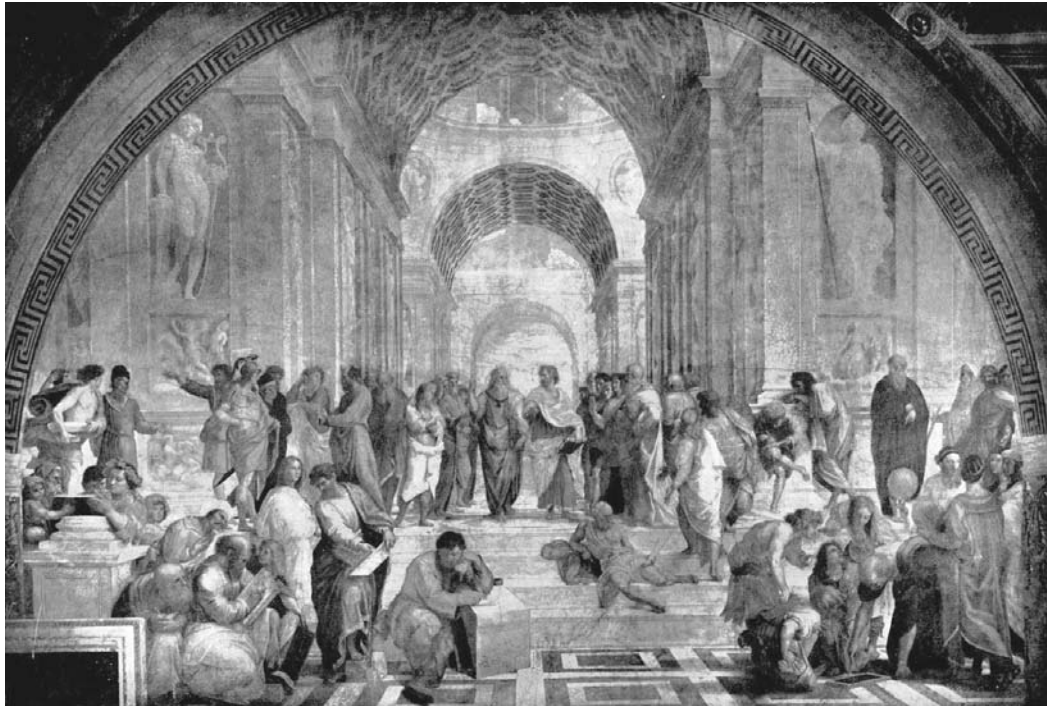
However, Sacks considers the spreading of all "universal cultures," as a negative development, because they were always "imperialistic." He specifies five such cultures: "Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, Medieval Christianity, Islam, and the Enlightenment." The arrangement is somewhat forced, however, to enable him to dispose of his central argument: "Sept. 11 happened when two universal cultures—each profoundly threatening to the other—met and clashed." Which two cultures he means, he leaves up to the reader, of course, but the stereotype "fanatical Islamists cut down the symbol of Western Enlightenment" is expressive enough. After that, Sacks places the following sentence: "It is time we exorcised Plato's ghost."

Who does not share in the condemnation of religious fanaticism, which insists in every case on the sole possession of truth, and thereby causes great mischief? However, it is totally incomprehensible, why "the search for truth" is supposed to be so dangerous. If Sacks himself still grants, that in most of the many religious tendencies in the world, "if we listen carefully, we will hear the voice of God," why should one then only look at the distinctions among the various religions, and not search for what is common in them?

And when it comes to religious peace for the Rabbi, why is there no reference to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing? The same Lessing with his great Jewish friend, Moses Mendelssohn, his *Nathan the Wise*, his good counsel of the famous "parable of the rings," showing forth the love of mankind which is the common "golden rule" of the three religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? Rabbi Sacks does not mention a word about the Jewish faith in the rest of the article, except for attacking persecution of Jews by "universalist cultures." But that is no substitute for the wealth of ideas of the thoroughly *universal* Mosaic religion.

## Plato's Cave

No one has developed the crux of this concept more truthfully than Lessing. He draws the correct conclusions from Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic* dialogue, whereby Plato wants to illustrate the difficulties of human knowledge: Men sit in the dark in a cave, and see on the wall before them only the shadows of things, cast by firelight from behind them. However, if the men realize their position, and



*The Renaissance master Raphael, in his The School of Athens, depicted Aristotle and Plato in the entranceway at top: Aristotle with his hand gesturing down, to the finite things of sense; Plato vigorously pointing up, to the ideas of the mind. Now says a London Times column, Plato's search for truth is to blame for Sept. 11!*

take into account the limitations of their sense perceptions, they can realize by “thinking behind it,” the truth of what is actually occurring. Thereby, through cognition, they can approach ever nearer to the truth, without ever fully grasping it.

Therefore in Germany, Lessing’s words in his *Rejoinder* have become a familiar quotation: “The truth is not, nor is supposed to be, in the possession of any man; rather, the sincere exertion which he has brought to bear, to come behind the truth, measures the value of a man. For not by possession, but by the search for the truth he expands his powers, wherein all his always-increasing perfection lies. Possession makes one still, lazy, proud. . . .

“If God would keep locked up on his right side, all truth, and on his left side, only the always active drive for truth, though with the addition that this drive forever and always strays; then would say to me, ‘Choose!’ I would fall before him on his left side, and would say, ‘Father, grant this! The pure truth is indeed for you alone!’ ”

Hannah Arendt of the Frankfurt School praised Lessing for this, but it was poisonous praise, because she twisted all around the words from his mouth: “Not only the understanding, that there can be no truth inside the world of men, but the joy, that there is none, and the unending dialogue among men never will cease, as long as men exist, characterizes the great Lessing.”

Lessing says: Man cannot possess or monopolize truth; it desires to be sought, and from that comes all progress. Arendt says: There is no truth, and everything is an endless palaver. That, however, would be the end of searching for truth; be-

cause if there is no truth, there is therefore no reason to seek it.

Rabbi Sacks obviously adheres to the Frankfurt School, and rejects Lessing’s version.

### **Gods In A Roman-Style Pantheon**

“There is a fundamental difference between God and religion,” Sacks writes, and thus far we can agree, for the one God stands manifestly above the different religions. Yet Sacks continues: “We serve God, author of diversity, by respecting diversity.” Why not? For in all diversity, we seek the common, the divine. One suspects that Rabbi Sacks has a notion of no real dialogue of cultures and religions, but a kind of zoo of religions, a “Pantheon,” as Lyndon LaRouche discussed in detail in Rome a short time ago (see “Towards A Dialogue Of Civilizations,” *EIR*, Nov. 9, 2001).

In Sacks’ polemical attack on the Platonic method of thinking, yet another defect becomes apparent, which is typical for all Aristotelians: Real is, for them, only the world of things and of difference. When they discuss God, this God is completely outside this reality, and a pure construct. Between the finiteness of things, and a not really existing infinity (God), there is for them no connection whatsoever.

However, the human spirit moves between the finite and the infinite, whose transfinite quality the mathematician Georg Cantor proved at the end of the 19th Century. Cantor’s general theory of infinite aggregates ran up against the bitter opposition of the Aristotelians, who in no case would accept that infinite aggregates could be expressed by transfinite numbers, and thereby could be handled like other numbers. His adversaries were of the view, that infinite aggregates—such