

Soldiers of God: Primal Emotions and Religious Terrorists

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Why do people kill in the name of God? What would motivate people to strap bombs to their bodies and detonate them in crowded places? In this book, the author, retired faculty from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and an authority on the relationship between animal and human behavior, examines the connections between primate dominance and the religious fury that led to the suicide bombings of September 11, 2001.

Humans share nearly ninety-nine percent of DNA with chimpanzees. Chimps kill for primacy and to defend the dominant male. Glass states that with primates, “everything is a test of power” and that with humans, “virtually every one of our social and cultural institutions is organized in a way that mimics the hierarchical behaviors of our animal ancestors.”

Indeed, the act of kneeling in deference to a higher power seems to be encoded into the human brain. However, while chimpanzees kneel in submission to the dominant male, humans kneel in reverence to the Supreme Being—which the author notes is male in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions. This dominance serves as “social glue” that both keeps the peace within primate groups and keeps them together, protecting more vulnerable females and offspring. For example, when their dominant male is killed, a group of chimpanzees is thrown into chaos until a new dominant male arises.

It is no different with humans. When a leader is lost, his followers are often demoralized and even scattered. Faith, says Glass, is “Mother Nature’s anti-anxiety drug.” Life is anxiety-provoking, and when humans feel that someone is truly “in charge,” this anxiety is soothed. If the supreme dominant male God is in His heaven, then all is right with the world.

Still, primate males who lose a battle of dominance want “to be somebody,” so they either leave the troop or affiliate themselves with the dominant male, much as the hijackers attached to bin Laden. The author presents biographical sketches of several of the hijackers and demonstrates their need to affiliate with what they perceived as Allah’s representative on earth.

What about Goddess religions? Do religions centered on many gods, rather than a supreme male god, have a similar need to commit violence to defend the dominant male? Early religions had many gods representing forces of nature. According to Jane Goodall, even chimps have been seen performing a “rain dance.” However, in most pantheistic societies, male gods are primary, and the progression from many gods and goddesses to one male god, states the author, simply mirrors primate dominance. Although there are young women among the suicide bombers, mostly men perform such acts.

The author contends that, although the drive to commit such violence is hard-wired into the human genetic code—an inheritance from humans' animal ancestors—people can use this knowledge to create a world without suicide terrorists. The science of sociobiology should show specific changes that can be made “to calm the savage heart beating in the soldiers of God.” Glass outlines several of the changes that must occur in order to create such a world.

CAROL LYNN STEWART (March / April 2004)

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