VIOLENCE OR DIALOGUE?
Psychoanalytic Insights on Terror and Terrorism

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Killer apes on American Airlines, or: how religion was the main hijacker on September 11

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On the dogma of religion... all mankind, from the beginning of the world to this day, have been quarreling, fighting, burning, and torturing one another, for abstractions unintelligible to themselves and to all others and absolutely beyond the comprehension of the human mind.

Thomas Jefferson

The terrorist attacks of September 11 still command our attention. Since that day, many of us have heard the idea that "the world will never be the same"—that this is something new, something different. The media spin is that the world has changed forever. But that is not true. The world has not changed forever. The message of September 11 is that the world not only has not changed, but that it is the same in terribly ancient ways. First and foremost, male bonded coalitionary violence with lethal raiding against innocents is not only still with us, but it is also part of human nature, particularly part of male human nature. It is as old as our species—indeed, it is older: it has been continuous for up to seven million years of hominid evolution. Second, September 11 reminds us that religion is a cultural construct of man and that its design allows religious leaders to exploit this violent propensity in men and use it for their own
purposes. I will first lay out the evidence for male bonded coalitionary violence and then address what makes us all vulnerable to religious beliefs and how religion hijacks this capacity for violence in men.

Male bonded coalitionary violence

The terrorists who hijacked the four planes on September 11 were 19 young men, all but one unmarried, bonded together by their faith in Islam and their loyalty to al-Qaeda. At a strictly behavioural level, this is unambiguously male bonded coalitionary violence and a lethal raid that killed thousands of innocents.

Coalitionary violence is not uniquely human. It occurs regularly in other species and is at times even favoured by Darwinian natural selection, including in our species. It is continuous in warfare in human history and in the time before recorded history (Keely, 1996; Wrangham, 1999). Therefore, one must dispel certain myths: that the past was peaceful and that peaceful societies prevailed in antiquity and in the time before history; that violent conflict was infrequent; that the basic causes of war were colonialism and capitalism; and that violence is a modern phenomenon. The reality is that war, in the form of lethal raiding against innocents by male bonded coalitions, is universal and common. During the brief 150,000 years of Homo sapiens' history, 90% of which were spent as hunter-gatherers, we have been ruthlessly violent (Keely, 1996).

In lethal raids, a party of allied men collectively seeks a vulnerable neighbour, assesses the probability of success, and conducts a surprise attack. This complex behaviour arose in our ape ancestors prior to the chimp/human split. About five to seven million years ago, we had a common ancestor, thought to be somewhat like the modern chimpanzee with whom we share some 98% of our DNA. With the environmental changes that affected Africa, the hominid line arose: Australopithecines, Homo habilis, Homo erectus, and, finally, Homo sapiens. Male bonded coalitionary violence dates back to our common ancestor and bloodies all our ancestor species. Men evolved brains with the capacity to assess and seek out opportunities to impose deadly violence (Buss & Duntley, 2000; Wrangham, 1999; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996).
clear. Violent death at the hands of other men speaks out through the nature of the fractures in the skeletons, the frequency of cranial trauma, the presence of arrow wounds, the predominance of male skeletons, and the rate of left-sided wounds, which one would expect from being struck by a predominantly right-handed species (Keely, 1996).

What is the cross-cultural evidence? Through the few existing hunter-gatherer tribes, we see into deep time and catch a glimpse of how we lived for most of our evolutionary history as fully formed *Homo sapiens*. An objective look shows that there are no “noble savages” and no Rousseauean peaceful pastoralists (Pinker, 2002). Constant tribal warfare, in the form of male bonded coalitionary violence with lethal raiding, characterizes life. The study of the Yanamamo of South America reveals that such murderousness is adaptive, even to the present day. Men who had killed had more wives and far more children (Chagnon, 1988). The traits that promote reproductive success are the ones that prosper in a population. The mind is what the brain does (Pinker, 1997). And the brain, like all life forms, has evolved by Darwinian natural selection. The psychological mechanisms that provide survival and reproductive advantages, and the behaviours they initiate, are the ones that become embedded in the human organism.

In addition, if the reader thinks about the spontaneous play of young boys, he or she will see that across all cultures, this play centres around the techniques of primitive war: male bonding, coalitions, and surprise attacks on their “enemies”. It is there in male brains, and all men start to practice it when they are just boys.

Religion

If one steps back and thinks about it, the laws of the universe are the same in Nepal and Nigeria, in Turkey, Tibet, and Texas. Yet, if you are religious, the one true God is, in likelihood, the God of your father, your mother, your grandfather, and your grandmother (Dawkins, 1994). Religion is largely an accident of geographical birth. Were Thomas Jefferson alive today, we could tell him that religion is now comprehensible to the human mind. Whether one wants to accept it or not, through a combination of psychology,
psychoanalysis, the revolution in the cognitive sciences, and anthropology, we now know why religion evolved, why particular religious ideas evolved, why they are widespread, why they are recurrent features of human minds and human societies, why they are attractive to human minds, and why they are related to survival and deadly violence (Boyer, 1994, 2001; Burkett, 1996; Freud, 1927c; Guthrie, 1993; Humphrey, 1996; Kriegman & Kriegman, 1998). Anthropologists estimate that there were as many as 100,000 different belief systems in human history involved in fomenting ethnic and tribal war.

All religious beliefs, not just the three predominant monotheistic religions of the modern world, have the common denominator of crediting nature with some human capacity for symbolic action. It is always a human concept with alterations. There is perhaps one violation of our intuitive assumptions, but there are many that confirm our intuitive assumptions to structure the belief and ultimately bring it back to a human form (Boyer, 1994, 2001). For example, God resides "everywhere" but has all the human sensory features. He is a person who sees, hears, thinks, and speaks.

All individuals are vulnerable to religious beliefs. What makes us human also makes us religious. Religion is a by-product of cognitive mechanisms that evolved for other adaptive purposes that were crucial for our survival. There are no uniquely religious components to the mind (Boyer, 2001). One must first define by-product. Reading and writing are cultural by-products, not biological adaptations. But they are by-products of the biological adaptations of vision, symbolic language, fine motor movement, and speech. To take another example, all cultures have music. Again, it is not a biological adaptation, but a by-product based on our biological adaptation of speech. Music is hard vowels and consonants built on the body's rhythms, such as the beating heart.

Individual mechanisms of religious belief

At the individual level, religion is the cultural by-product of many different cognitive mechanisms that evolved to promote survival. To reiterate: the mind is what the brain does, and it is comprised of numerous specific mechanisms evolved by Darwinian natural
selection to promote the survival and reproduction of the genes that built the mind/brain. A partial list of these cognitive devices begins with the mechanism of *decoupled cognition*. This ability arises in childhood and is seen vividly in pretend play. A child might say that a bottle cap is a flying saucer. The child knows that it is a cap to a bottle but can decouple this cognition and think of the cap as a flying saucer, with the attributes imagined and related to as such. The more sophisticated aspect of such cognitive abilities is seen when one can think about a conversation from a previous week. One can decouple one's cognition from the present and call up that conversation and yet know where one is in the present. That capacity is obviously adaptive and is utterly crucial to memory. One can also think about a future discussion with someone without losing the sense of being in the present. Future planning depends on such cognitive ability. Such a mechanism easily comes into play in religion when one engages unseen figures, whether gods or ancestors.

The *attachment system* plays a central role in religion. When we are distressed, we turn towards a caretaker, usually a parent or parent substitute. A parallel is found with religion. When one is in distress, one turns towards an attachment figure. Whichever god or ancestor to whom a religious person appeals, it is often a caretaker figure. This utilizes our evolved attachment system to convey a sense of reality. And, in religions, the gods are often super parents who can provide reassurance beyond that of any mortal parent (Humphrey, 1996).

The concept of *transference* is particularly useful in understanding aspects of religion. One must first ask why the capacity for transference evolved in the human mind. What adaptive function does it serve? Early relationship strategies form stable personality characteristics. Early relationships are the grammar for conducting later relationships. One need only think what it would be like if with each new relationship we had to learn anew how to relate to people as our lives unfolded. Basing present relationships on past relationships—real, imagined, or wished for—is an efficient way of anticipating outcomes.

The capacity for transference evolved as a crucial aspect of the human mind (Nesse & Lloyd, 1992). In psychoanalytically based therapy, we see daily how disturbed early relationships distort present relationships. When that transference is repeated in psycho-
analytic therapy, the details of the transference itself become the arena for treatment. Think of all the potential transferences mobilized in religions between believers and their gods—God the father, God the mother, and so on—and all that we may bring of our personal relationships with our fathers, mothers, and significant objects into religious beliefs.

Humans are born with exquisite mechanisms to identify and relate to kin. That is crucial not just to our survival, but to the survival of copies of our genes that reside in our kin. We evolved to favour those with our genes over those without. Religions evoke and exploit our kin emotions. Catholicism offers a superb example. The nuns are sisters, the priests are fathers, the monks are brothers, and the Pope is the Holy Father.

Reciprocal altruism is essential to cognitive ability. Humans have complex cognitive software for reciprocal exchange. What one gives and what one receives are kept in strict account. Sacrificial offerings are just one place where this capacity is used by religions—for example, sacrificing a pig to bring a good harvest. Often prayer is an explicit plea for reciprocity. If the supplicant promises something, he or she hopes to be rewarded in return.

Humans have what are called theory-of-mind modules. They are taken for granted, and people experience them as a seamless part of the conscious mind. But they are hardly simple. People know without being taught that other people have minds like ours, with wishes, beliefs, desires, and passions. We can read others’ mental states with eye cues. At about the age of 5 years, we have the capacity to know that others might hold a different belief about something than we do. We can truly appreciate this capacity when we see its clinical absence, which is autism (Baron-Cohen, 1995).

In an intensely social species like ours, a theory of mind is crucial to working with other people, anticipating or reading their thoughts, their wishes, their desires. Religious beliefs easily utilize this capacity. Gods have thoughts, wishes, desires, and memories. Gods usually have a human mind with all the possibilities: For some, religion represents theory-of-mind modules run amok (Pinker, 1997).

Human minds contain natural kinds modules that permit us to distinguish animate from inanimate objects. This ability to cognitively see the living “essence” of things is imperfect and easily slides into assuming that there is a living essence in inanimate objects
(Kirkpatrick, 1999). Animism is the sharpest example of this, but it is present in the more complex religious ideas that impute living substance to nonliving things and spaces.

Human brains are equipped with person file systems. We are born with them, and we store information about people in them. Person file systems stay there, even if a person dies or is long absent. It permits us to “talk”, in the privacy of our own minds, with those close to us who have died. That is just one step away from formal ancestor worship.

Humans have moral feeling systems. One frequent argument is that morality requires religion. Not so. We might not have formal explicit moral systems, but we are all born with moral inferential systems (Alexander, 1987). This is clear in young children, who know the basic difference between right and wrong. Religions hijack this capacity, for their own purposes and to justify their existence.

Group uses of religion

The above are just some of the individual cognitive capacities that make us all susceptible to religious beliefs. But here we are concerned about terrorism and group violence. Central to understanding religion’s role in human groups is what is called our naive sociology, or our groupishness. One of humanity’s weaknesses is our inability to appreciate groups as groups of individuals. We very easily use group tags and explain complicated groups in a singular, reductionistic way. “The French feel anger at . . .” or “the Russians think that . . .” are examples of this thinking. Religion historically has served as one of the crucial tags that instantly distinguish a group, dividing the world into us and them (Boyer, 2001). Throughout recorded history, as on September 11, religion has served as a tag for “death-deserving” enemies. For instance: “It was not Seamus who blew up my house in Northern Ireland; it was the Catholics.”

We are intensely groupish, which is not surprising as it is a survival mechanism and is adaptive throughout our evolutionary history. Groupishness is one of the most robust findings in social psychology. If one takes a room of people, divides it arbitrarily into two groups, and gives each group tasks, members of each group quickly feel loyalty towards their group, idealize it, and devalue the capacities of the other group. As Freud said: “An intimate friend
and a hated enemy have always been necessary requirements of my emotional life” (Gay, 1988). We all need enemies and allies (Volkan, 1994). That explains what we all believe to be true—that the groups to which we belong are superior, and others must struggle with inferior associations. Religious leaders prey upon this groupishness to ensure loyalty to the faith and one’s co-religionists.

Gods personify, control, and appease the unpredictable. Gods also induce a fear of higher authority and ensure subordination. People turn over the fruits of their labour to invisible gods, not just to the current king or tax collector. What happens to the dominant male in any social group if the group is successful and gets too large? Must the group splinter? Over our long evolutionary history, group dissolution happened many times before a unique innovation arose that allowed larger groups to stabilize. That discovery was that there is greater safety in declaring oneself to be a mere messenger who represents the power of a divinity. The messenger, God’s representative on earth, has authority without having to take the chance of full responsibility. The leader who accepts inferior status to a deity chooses a brilliant and cunning strategy. As every subordinate knows, one’s commands carry weight when they are accompanied by the threat of a greater power (Dennett, 1997). The “mere messenger” who currently plagues the West is Osama bin Laden.

Why are religions successful? Supernatural beliefs become religions when they start to serve important social functions and define a group’s identity. Social functions and defining a group’s identity are what constitutes a religion. One way to think of the social function of religion is as a technique for success. When nine men were trapped in a coal mine in Pennsylvania in July 2002, many of the miners started to pray and later attributed their dramatic rescue to God’s will. Conveniently forgotten was that in that same month, a mine explosion in China trapped 39 miners, but those miners died.

What are some of the social uses of religion? Religions are useful in acquiring resources. Think of the untaxed wealth of the current religions in our world. Religion assists men in attracting mates. Osama bin Laden, at some time before September 11, took a fourth legal wife, a 17-year-old Yemeni girl, and there might be many women eager to bear his children in the Islamic world. It is naïve to think that such polygamous behaviour represents only the extreme end of the spectrum, such as Jim Jones and David Koresh. In Salt
Lake City, Utah, one can visit the house of the Mormon founder, Brigham Young. A large dormitory extension was necessary for his 19 wives.

Religions are very effective at thwarting competition. The reality is that no religion has been successful by tolerating its competitors. Religions must redirect loyalties to succeed. Various ethnic, racial, and diverse linguistic groups can fall under the umbrella of one religion. We tend to think of religions as promoting family values, but one of their main functions is to override those loyalties. The idea of subverting families may come as a surprise to those who think of religions as oriented towards family values. But the family is a danger to religion. Families constitute rival coalitions. They have the unfair advantage of being bound together by kin emotions. People favour and forgive family members before they do others. Men are also quicker to seek revenge when their kin are harmed (Pinker, 1997). The hostility towards family values is nicely illustrated in the Bible:

I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. [Matt. 10: 34-37]

The man speaking was Jesus.

September 11

Religions serve as a cultural adaptation for facilitating terrorism and war. They permit the take-over of groups by disenfranchised young males. Belief in an afterlife and a reward for dying in a holy war helps minimize the fear of death in the pursuit of conquests. Religious adherence turns off mechanisms of compassion and turns on and maximizes dehumanization. Religions are very effective at guiding in-group morality and out-group hatred. They give followers the ability to assess others' commitments to dangerous tasks and to maximize the commitment to those potentially lethal endeavours. Oaths have the imprint of psychic terror and serve as costly advertisements. They broadcast the superiority and commitment of those
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who swear allegiance. Religions often guarantee warriors their share of the spoils. Also, religions are very useful in preparing for war to exterminate out-groups (Hartung, 1995; Kriegman & Kriegman, 1996). The body count of September 11 and human history is the blood-soaked proof.

On 11 September 2001, the United States was attacked, and 3,000 people died in the name of Islam. The genteel distinction between fundamental Islam and moderate Islam came down with the twin towers (Dawkins, 2001). Who could ignore the widespread cheering in the Islamic world? But, while one is quick to point the finger at Islam, most Christians want to pretend that Christianity was not imposed by the sword. The cross has accompanied the sword everywhere. The Torah contains instructions on stealing from, enslaving, and murdering outsiders (Hartung, 1995). Parts of the Old Testament are a blueprint for murder and genocide. In the Bible, Deuteronomy 20: 16 instructs the Jews entering the cities promised to them by God to “leave alive nothing that breatheth”.

Christianity has empowered disenfranchised young males in their quest for power, status, and wealth. Muhammad and his followers, disenfranchised young men, imposed themselves on the Arabian Peninsula. And a more conservative brand of Islam now in Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism, was imposed by disenfranchised young men. One also must remember the Protestant take-over of England, which was carried out by disenfranchised young men.

The three monotheistic religions preach that death is not the end of an individual’s existence, which enables religious warriors to minimize the fear of death. And it is more ludicrous, and debasing to women, when a religion promises 72 virgins, eager and exclusive, in paradise for those who die “martyr” deaths for the faith (Dawkins, 2001). As long as such beliefs flourish, so will terrorists.

September 11 presents us with these ancient mechanisms in full, unobscured view: 19 young men, bonded together in the name of God, plotted and conducted the lethal raid on New York and the Pentagon, and 3,000 innocent people were murdered.

In the spring of 2002, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was under siege. People talked about how terrible and blasphemous this was. It was certainly terrible, but it was not blasphemous: it was emblematic. The siege represents the fundamental points of this essay. Male bonded coalitionary violence with lethal raiding is part of male human nature. Religion is an invention of man, and religion
hijacks males' propensity for such coalitionary killing to further its adherents' prerogatives.

If we truly want to understand September 11 at its most fundamental level, we have to face the horror of our evolutionary history, the deadly legacy it has left in all men, and the violence that resides at the core of all religion. The choice is ours.


Supernatural Consolation, New York: Copernicus.


