

# Human nature, religion can combine to wreak havoc

The two strongest forces in the world are religious belief and human nature. They interact in strange, unpredictable ways. Events on the other side of the world and here in Colorado Springs should get us all thinking about what happens when spirituality and biology get ready to rumble.

Religion is at its best when it accepts the idea of human nature but calls us to be something more. Left to ourselves, humans gathered in groups for survival and killed those who were different. Male competition for females was brutal and often deadly. Females had to submit themselves to the stronger, dominant males in exchange for support and protection when they bore children. Not a pretty picture.

Fortunately, a few thousand or so years ago, something happened. Religion came along, with a deeper sense of right and wrong beyond what our mere animal instincts told us to do. "Thou shalt not commit adultery." "Love thy neighbor as thyself." "Thou shalt not kill."

These are all profoundly different things from what our primitive ancestors did. The difficulty we have in doing them shows how firmly rooted in our ancestry their opposites remain. Religion and morality showed up late at the party of human history. They're a lid on the smoldering cauldron of our passions.

But what happens when religion throws off the lid and adds fuel to the fire? What if the teachings of a religion resonate with our animal nature? The two then feed off each other, with horrific results.

For example, we're hardwired to prefer people who look like we do, and distrust people who look different. That's an instinct that goes way back to when we had to gather in groups to survive. It's why we're easily seduced by the idea that people who look and act like us are better than strangers. Basically, "we" are better than "them."

When religion sanctions such differences, the results are socially and culturally poisonous. We need look no further than the "white power" Christian theology of the Ku



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Klux Klan, or the religious pronouncements on the inferiority of blacks before the Civil War. To be sure, courageous religious leaders have always led the fight for equality and the elimination of prejudice. But when it goes the other way, the results are horrible.

Nor should we forget the Islamic theology of suicide bombing. The overwhelming majority of suicide bombers are male. Because of our male nature, it is men who are more violent, who take more risks, who are more likely to fight and are

more likely to die. Suicide bombers are trained in a religious environment, and are absolutely willing to die for their faith, certain in the knowledge that they will be rewarded in the afterlife. And what is their heavenly reward? A harem of virgins. Their most primal male urges will be completely gratified, straight out of a biology textbook.

But we don't need to look to the afterlife to find a similar vision. Religiously sanctioned polygamy is with us today. The Quran permits devout Muslims to have up to four wives. Here in America, Mormons practiced polygamy until faced with military force by the U.S. government. Fundamentalist Mormon sects still practice it.

It doesn't take a rocket social scientist to see the problems of polygamy. Humans produce offspring of both sexes in very close to equal numbers, so competition for women gets fast and furious. Women will be pressured to marry young, before they can consent in any meaningful sense, and some men will go without while others have plenty. This leaves a lot of angry, disaffected men doing angry, disaffected things.

No wonder civilized societies find polygamy repugnant. But when it is religiously sanctioned, it flourishes.

There's another example of a religious group that glorifies biology, right here in Colorado Springs. It doesn't train suicide bombers, nor does it endorse polygamy. But the mix is just as toxic. We'll see why Friday, in the second part of this column.

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