

The Identifying Behaviors: Cultures and Religions

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Abstract: Cultures and religions have produced major benefits for billions of people, mutilations of billions of people and deaths of millions. The most reasonable and parsimonious interpretation of these disparate phenomena starts with human nature. Humans, like other social mammals have an innate inclination to form exclusive cooperative groups that have conflicts with other groups of their own species and have restricted participation in reproduction. Cultures and religions provide identification of the members of a group. Cultures and religions are identifying behaviors, like passwords. They allow the development of very large groups.

Key words: Culture, religion, identification, groups, behaviors, war, genocide

INTRODUCTION

Groups of wolves and groups of howler monkeys make very loud howls to identify themselves and to advertise their geographical locations in order to avoid physical contact with the other groups of their own species. Similarly, African wild dogs, lions, chimpanzees, several species of monkeys, humans and many other species of social mammals, form exclusive groups associated with geographical locations. Each exclusive group maintains some degree of separation from the other groups of its own species and tends to have conflicts with those other groups. The conflicts enhance the separations and the separations provide not only defense against the infectious diseases of other groups but also adaptation to the environment. For example, if the mountain group of a species and the plains group of that species are reproductively separated by conflict, each group evolves differently in adaptation to its own particular environment. The reproductive separation provides this major biological benefit (Digger, 2003). The special developments of the larynx in wolves and howler monkeys provide enhanced separation.

The presence in humans of the mammalian tendency to form groups for conflict explains why many humans participate willingly in racism and genocides and wars (Rummel, 1994) and why so many humans take a strong interest in peculiar games, games of group conflict (football, baseball, soccer, basketball and hockey etc.) played by teams associated with geographical locations. Also this is why understanding and vigilance and proactive work are needed (Goldhagen, 2009) to prevent outbreaks of terrorism and racism and genocides and wars.

Most animal groups are small including only a dozen or a few dozen individuals who know each other well. Some human groups also are small (Olmsted, 1959),

groups such as street gangs and biker gangs and sports teams, each group with its own culture. Humans, however, are able to gain major benefits from having exclusive cooperative groups that are very large, groups (tribes, nations) of thousands or millions, groups that include people who have never even seen each other. Larger groups have had advantages in defense and in attack. So humans make use of the identifying behaviors, the cultures and the religions, to provide recognition of group members, for conflict with other groups and for biological reproduction within the large group. Cultures and religions enable a group to enlarge and include those people who have not seen each other. Cultures and religions are helpful to small groups but they are a real necessity for forming groups that are both exclusive and large. Cultures and religions are identifying, like passwords and like passwords they are mostly arbitrary and without discernible foundation in observation or reason. The lack of foundation in observation and reason is why cultures and religions make no sense except to the initiated.

CULTURES

Part of the nature of cultures was revealed by Japanese army generals in 1945. After losing the battle of Iwo Jima, the Japanese could manage almost no defense against American bombers. The centers of sixty six Japanese cities were then destroyed by low level fire-bombing and it became obvious that Japan could not win the war. In public speeches, Japanese army generals started repeating the mantra. The hundred million must die. The generals were preparing to try to fight off an invasion of their home islands but they were also saying that all Japanese must die, to avoid the dishonor of surrender. The generals were brought to that position by their culture: never surrendering (Hillenbrand, 2010).

Clearly, the generals had already surrendered, unconditionally, to their culture. They were slaves of their culture. They sincerely intended that all Japanese would die including all their wives and children and babies and friends, rather than have their culture violated! They were not successful in imposing this view on the Japanese home islands but they were deadly serious in their intention.

In fact, they forced a mass suicide on the civilians (including women and children and toddlers and babies) in parts of the island of Okinawa in anticipation of losing the battle of Okinawa. In some areas they gave hand grenades to the civilians and supervised the killings. The culture had imprisoned the generals: facing their enemy in battle they were courageous but in the face of their culture they were ready to surrender the lives of 100 million people. The people in Okinawa who died in this way were killed by cultural folly.

The foot binding of girls in China is another example of the peculiar activities that cultures can produce. Between the tenth and the twentieth centuries in China some 2 billion young girls had their feet bound and were crippled by cultural folly. The initial binding usually entailed the deliberate breaking of several bones in the feet and the parents of the girls preferred to hear the screams of their children rather than see normal feet grow. It would be incorrect to call these parents abnormal, since they were a majority and there were billions of them. Presumably the culture had imprisoned the minds of these normal parents. The imposed disability of the children lasted a lifetime and normal walking was impossible. Most of the people considered women with bound feet to be more beautiful and marriageable than normal women (they did not know that strong is beautiful). Foot binding was not done in some areas of the country and there were many unsuccessful attempts to stop it but only when the communists took power and banned it in 1949 did it stop completely. The culture changed.

The so called female circumcision which consists of cutting out the clitoris and other structures of young females was and in some places in northern Africa still is a prominent part of culture. Millions of parents have been complicit. Presumably the objective has been to reduce sexual activity in the group mutilated but cutting off parts of young males has apparently not been done in northern Africa. Killing females whose sexual mores are not those of the majority is also part of the culture in many groups and the techniques include shooting, stoning, beating and burning. The honor killings of females are also part of the culture in some groups and the killers are often the

victim's dishonored brothers or father. It seems that the killers actually regain the lost honor by killing the female member of their own family. The rules of culture are arbitrary. Apparently, it is only women who are killed by this kind of cultural folly.

A culture produces identification and separation of a large (but exclusive) group, for restriction of biological reproduction and subsequent adaptation to the group's environment. Cultures can also produce civility and lawfulness and sports and art and music and theater and it is remarkable that they have also produced in billions of people, activities that are irrational and harmful and deadly. Cultures have produced billions of children crippled by their own parents, offspring mutilated or killed by family members and people who kill themselves. Cultures can capture the minds of billions of normal people and produce almost any kind of activity. To protect or practice a culture some people are willing to pay and to make others (including children) pay, enormous prices in injuries and deaths.

RELIGIONS

Religions are similar to cultures. Like cultures, religions have produced activities that are irrational and harmful and deadly. In the year 1099 Christian crusaders from Europe stormed and took Jerusalem. After the city was won, these crusaders slaughtered some 60,000 non-Christian noncombatants in Jerusalem including women and children and toddlers and babies. No doubt the crusaders were sure they were doing the right thing according to their religion. When the news reached Europe, the church bells rang and there was rejoicing, since Christians had gained better access to and control of Jerusalem. The thousands of people slaughtered in Jerusalem were apparently unimportant to the rejoicing Christians as were the people killed in battle.

In Europe and America, notably in the 16th and 17th centuries, thousands of heretics and witches were killed by Christians. Most of the victims were female and most were burned alive, often on a slow fire and following prolonged privation and torture in jail (to produce confessions). Strangulation, skull crushing and ripping apart were also used. It appears that the perpetrators were willing slaves to murderous ideas, prisoners of the religion, followers of the biblical instruction Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. The number of victims destroyed by these religious follies has been estimated to be as few as 30,000 and as many as 500,000. Accurate numbers are not available but the killings were obviously

a major activity of this religion. In a major way, Christianity was an organization for torture and killing. This religion underwent a substantial change and Christians no longer feature killings and of course, Christianity is not the only religion that has perpetrated mass slaughter.

Aztecs incas and Maya in Central America had considerable enthusiasm for killing from religious conviction. In some areas there were regular ritualistic killings of humans to provide energy to the gods who needed this energy to raise the sun in the morning and provide other necessities of human life. Often there were wars fought for the purpose of capturing living victims to be sacrificed but the youngest victims were local children, recommended by their parents.

Clearly, the parents of such a child were imprisoned by their religion, deluded by their religion so that they could betray their child's trust in them. Typically the victim was held supine by four priests on a stone table located on a pyramid without benefit of anesthesia and a fifth priest used a ceremonial flint knife to cut into the chest and free the heart.

The heart (still twitching) was removed and placed on a special display plate. Often the skulls were kept and put on display racks. On one occasion there were four separate lineups of victims on a new pyramid and four crews of priests cutting victims at four separate tables for 4 consecutive days. It is thought that such killings started in the year 600 BC or thereabouts and by 1500 AD there were some 20,000 victims being killed per year on average.

Accurate numbers are not available but 20 million or so victims were killed in Central America during the 2000 years of sacrificing. In the early 16th century the Spanish conquerors by threatening the priests with death, made them stop this kind of killing. After 2000 years of killings, the religion changed. The sun nevertheless continued to rise each day. The pyramids still stand in Central America, monuments to the 20 million people killed there by religious folly.

As Blaise Pascal (a devout Christian, a founder of Probability theory and inventor of the hydraulic press) observed, men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction (Pascal, 1663). Killings from religious conviction are still done without regret, notably killings by suicide bombers who believe that after they die they will not be dead and that they will be rewarded for the killings. Such killings are welcomed by many people.

The 911 killings of 3,000 or so people in 2001 were based on religious conviction and these killings produced

jubilation and celebration on the streets in parts of the middle east. Religion-based killings were celebrated in the year 2001. A recent survey of opinion found that 84% of people in Egypt, 86% in Jordan, 6% in Lebanon and 5% in Turkey approve of death as the appropriate punishment for leaving the Muslim religion. From religious conviction, almost anything can be done cheerfully.

Under the influence of religion, many people seem to have unconsciously decided to forgo observation and to abandon reason. The most famous instance of this kind involved the members of the examining committee that examined Galileo in his own laboratory. Galileo was accused of teaching that planet Earth moves around the sun and that some moons were in orbit around Jupiter. The religious belief was that planet Earth was motionless at the center of the universe and everything else in the universe moved around planet Earth in perfect circles and at perfectly constant speeds. This religious belief was erroneous.

Galileo invited the investigating committee to look through his telescope and see four moons of Jupiter that were circling around Jupiter (not circling around Earth). Every one of the committee members refused to look through the telescope, saying they knew that what Galileo said was there could not be there.

A religion, like a culture, provides identification and separation of a large group for conflict with other groups and for exclusive biological reproduction with subsequent adaptation to the group's environment. Religions also help to produce civility, lawfulness, consideration for others, charity and alleviation of suffering.

These activities have benefited billions of people and it is remarkable that religions have also produced the torture and killing of millions over thousands of years and the throwing of acid in the faces of school children. Religions can capture the minds of normal people and produce almost any kind of activity such as the slaughter of innocents in Jerusalem, the burning of heretics and witches and the 20 million killings on the pyramids of Central America.

To protect or practice a religion some people are willing to pay and to make others (including children) pay, enormous prices in injuries and deaths.

CONCLUSION

Cultures and religions are identifying behaviors. They have contributed to biological and military success. This is in answer to the question, What are cultures and religions and why do humans have them?

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