

## **Human Nature, Aggression, Politics, Religion, and Wisdom**

Jim Kennedy

(last modified 12/29/2006)

---

This page offers some thoughts and observations on human nature, aggression, and how greater wisdom might be incorporated into politics.

### **Aggression, War, and Religion**

The history of humanity is basically innumerable stories of men achieving dominance in one group and then aggressively expanding their domain through invasions, wars, and conquest. This can be seen in world history books, in religious texts such as the Bible, and in archeological evidence (Hayden, 2003). The history of humanity appears to be a legacy consistent with the ideas of evolution that conflict, competition, dominance, and survival of the fittest are central factors in life.

The most straightforward explanation for this pervasive pattern is deep-seated instinctive motivations. These include motivations for certain men to rise to leadership positions in a group, for others to follow the leaders and find fulfillment in fighting and conquering other groups, and to feel fundamentally superior to those whom the aggression is aimed toward. Research has identified an authoritarian personality factor that indicates a strong need to establish and obey some authority (Altemeyer, 1996; Somit and Peterson, 1997). People with a high degree of this personality factor view conflict and dominance as the main activity of human life. Other research shows that aggression is a personality disposition that has genetic variation among individuals and can be enhanced or subdued by experiences during life (Carey, 2003; Hammer and Copeland, 1998).

These aggressive, violent motivations vary among people and cultures, but continue to dominate politics and world affairs. However, these instincts are increasingly out of place and detrimental in the modern world.

The absurdity of the human instinct for aggression is revealed by the cases when former enemies meet and reminisce years after a war. This has happened for various wars, including Vietnam and the U.S. civil war. An enlightened civilization would skip the tragedy of battles, and just have the gatherings to reminisce about differences.

Religion has often been a tool for these aggressive tendencies. The positive aspects of the religious inclination, including compassion and altruism, are often limited to a religious in-group, while the predominate activity is aggression toward those with different beliefs and values. Fundamentalist religions appear to be a manifestation of the authoritarian personality (Altemeyer, 1996).

The concept of "religious war" is one of the more explicit manifestations of the instincts for aggression. The absurd contradiction between the core themes of most spiritual teachings and the

aggression of the religious groups is obvious to those outside the group but not to those inside.

For example, Jesus did not build armies and fight wars -- although he could have. Jesus took an alternative path. The long history of war, conquest, oppression, and witch burning among people who claim to be Christians represents the very evil in humans that Jesus' teachings and life example were attempting to overcome.

Yet, human society, including most religions, still widely consider wars as necessary and the people who fight them as heroes. The deep-seated attraction to war is evidenced by the quick elevation of every social issue to a war. Thus, we have the (ineffective) war on drugs and the war on crime.

In spite of the absurdities, many people still appear to find their primary meaning in life through fighting wars. George W. Bush, considers himself the "war president" and war is the hallmark of his administration.

People in the U.S. justify the U.S. military and political interventions in the Middle East by saying that American values are being attacked by Middle Eastern religious extremists. People in the Middle East say that their traditional way of life is being attacked by U.S. efforts to promote unpopular governments that have favorable policies for oil and consumerism. They feel that terrorism is their only option for opposition to much more powerful forces. Both sides often invoke God in support of their violent acts.

In fact, it appears to me that this conflict is a manifestation of the basic drive for aggression and violence on both sides. Both sides are mutually reinforcing and promoting more aggression. Of course, it is likely that the U.S. presence and associated interventions and conflicts in this region would be greatly reduced if the U.S. did not need Middle Eastern oil at favorable prices.

In defining himself as the war president, George W. Bush has greatly empowered himself, but also greatly empowered the terrorists. Wars are traditionally fought among powerful nations. In declaring war on terrorism, he defined terrorists as powerful. That will be very appealing to the aggressive young men who are looking for meaning in life through battle.

Tendencies for aggression and dominance were also shown in President Bush's policy that the U.S. will pre-emptively attack countries that he deems a threat, and in specifically naming Iran and North Korea as threats to be dealt with. The fact that he invaded Iraq when Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction or have a role in 9/11 made the point clearly that he may attack based upon false justification. The result of Bush's actions have been that North Korea and Iran greatly increased their nuclear programs, and now have a much stronger incentive to share nuclear technology with terrorists who might attack the U.S. These actions have had a long-term destabilizing effect on international relations that will increase aggression, violence, and the likelihood of war.

The aggressive tendencies of the Bush administration have been consistently out of touch with reality, as can be seen in their erroneous claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, in their fantasies about how the people in Iraq would react to an American invasion, in their unrealistic projections for the costs and duration of the war, in declaring a U.S. victory after the initial invasion (when the sustained conflict was just beginning), and in failing to anticipate the results of their pre-emptive strike policy. The administration also has failed to perceive the depth and type of

religious beliefs in that region and that democratic elections will likely result in conservative religious leaders who oppose American materialism and secular values.

At some point, the Middle Eastern oil countries almost certainly will become more competent capitalists and realize that they can maximize their profits by cutting back production and forcing oil prices way up. This strategy works when there is not meaningful competition, as is the case for oil production. The royal family dictatorship in Saudi Arabia depends on U.S. protection and support in exchange for low oil prices. But this type of arrangement with dictatorship governments cannot be viewed as a viable long-term means for maintaining oil prices that do not maximize profits. Aggressive, authoritarian people can be expected to advocate military action to obtain oil when the natural market forces do eventually come into effect.

### **Abortion and Religious Aggression**

Why has abortion become such a flash point for Christians when the Bible does not specifically address abortion? Rigid views on abortion have become a fundamental issue for conservative Christians. However, the various Bible passages that are used to justify opposition to abortion are indirect and open to alternative interpretations. (Google abortion bible to get the various arguments pro and con.) Further, those who use religion to argue that abortion is taking a human life often are proponents of war and the death penalty.

It appears to me that the abortion issue is a manifestation of religious aggression. People with aggressive impulses need an issue that gives them a sense of meaning in life through conflict and a sense of superiority over people with different beliefs. The conflict is the motivating factor more than the specific issue.

Using Biblical arguments that disregard social and scientific advances is particularly dubious. For example, the Old and New Testaments of the Bible specifically condone or accept slavery (e.g., Exodus 21; Ephesians 6:5; I Timothy 6:1-2). The fact that Christians do not (currently) advocate and fight for slavery is very revealing about their attitudes toward the Bible and the need to adapt Biblical teachings to modern times. The passages about slavery are much clearer than the passages used to justify opposition to abortion.

### **Bringing Wisdom into Politics**

One of the major lessons from these events is that any time a politician or government official starts advocating war and invasion, we as a society must recognize that our instinctive aggressive reaction is to rally behind the calls for "get 'em" and "bring it on." We must develop a culture that has wisdom beyond these primitive emotional reactions and displays a profound skepticism of violent, aggressive acts. War and violence may sometimes be necessary, but in the modern age, the instincts for aggression and violence are inappropriate in the majority of cases. It is unwise to let persons with aggressive, authoritarian tendencies get control of government.

We must attempt to find the wisdom to recognize when it is necessary to respond to aggression with violence, and when a nonviolent, forgiving response is best (as would be more consistent with the teachings and life of Jesus). Violent conflicts and wars give people a primitive

but powerful sense of meaning in life that tends to self propagate and make it difficult to make decisions based on wisdom. When possible, the best mode of change for countries and ethnic groups is like the best mode of change for individuals; change can occur when people face their own dissatisfaction and sense of ethics during a time when they are not embroiled in violent conflicts. The Soviet Union collapsed primarily from internal pressure when the people had a chance to recognize their own dissatisfaction. It did not collapse when it was embroiled in a major violent war. Social evolution in the Middle East is greatly hindered by the frequent wars.

When a violent response is necessary, it is very important to narrowly focus the response on those responsible for the aggression and not use it as an opportunity to widely express our own aggressive impulses in ways that promote and propagate more aggression.

We also must accept and encourage discussion that challenges our initial inclinations. Hasty decisions or decisions made by a secret or narrow group are most likely to be based on aggressive instincts and to be out of touch with reality.

We also must recognize and be very wary of the promotion of aggression and dominance through religion. Religion can bring out the best and the worst in people. Those who adhere to the positive aspects of religion such as altruism, compassion, and harmony must be willing to speak out and challenge those who use religion as a tool to bring out the detrimental, aggressive instincts in people.

## References

- Altemeyer, B. (1996). *The Authoritarian Spector*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Carey, Gregory (2003). *Human Genetics for the Social Sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hammer, Dean, and Copeland, Peter (1998). *Living with our Genes*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hayden, Brian (2003). *A Prehistory of Religion: Shamans, Sorcerers, and Saints*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books.
- Somit, A., and Peterson, S.A. (1997). *Darwinism, Dominance, and Democracy*. Westport, CN: Praeger.

Return to: [Integrating Science and Spirituality](#)