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Commentary

A world afflicted with blind spots

By Barbara A. Oakley

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I awakened to the smell of something strong and strange. The alarm clock came blearily into view: 2:12 a.m. I'd been asleep only an hour. My research and writing sometimes keep me up late -- it's difficult, after all, puzzling out the neuroscience behind why sinister people do what they do.

Stumbling down the stairs, I was drawn by the smell to the kitchen. It was our younger son, call him "Ahmed," a Muslim boy we had recently adopted, along with his brother, from Kosovo. Ahmed was cooking in the kitchen. Correction -- Ahmed was cooking bacon in the kitchen.

He was cooking it at 2 in the morning because he was embarrassed about being seen eating pork.

Muslims and Islam are often news flashpoints. This week's top stories, for example, have centered on Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. People wonder: Is Ahmadinejad to be trusted, or at least reasoned with, when he says that Iran's nuclear program is purely for peaceful purposes? Other stories have centered on Islamic fundamentalists' efforts to kill the English teacher who allowed her young students to name their teddy bear Muhammad. How irrational, we think. Then there's the British hospital turning Muslims' beds to face Mecca, and the suicide bomber striking near Defense Secretary Robert Gates in Afghanistan.

Why is Islam so much in the news, and often so negatively? I think there's insight to be gained when you look at Islam up close -- as part of your family. And also what neuroscience is telling us about human nature, and human malevolence.

Have I observed our sons' religion creating intellectual blind spots? Absolutely. Our sons felt free to bash Christianity, Judaism and virtually every religion other than Islam with impunity. (My husband and I are agnostics.) When I pointed out that somehow, in their free-spirited exchanges, Islam never received any critical comments, our sons were nonplussed. Despite the seeming free-thinking nature of their irreverence, our sons simply couldn't conceive of saying anything at all critical of Islam. In fact, the mere thought of criticism seemed frightening. This was understandable -- Muslim critics of Islam, even in "free speech" Europe and the United States, often face death threats.

But this "blind spot" phenomenon is not just a function of Islam -- or even of religion. Strangely enough, our sons' behavior reminded me of nothing so much as the behavior I observed years ago, when I lived and worked among the Soviets as a Russian translator. Living in a world where atheism was king and all religions were fair game for criticism, I observed the same types of blind spots as those of our sons. Despite the decaying dregs of the Soviet Empire surrounding us, and our own malnourishment (food was in short supply), the Soviets I worked with proudly asserted

that theirs was the best system in the world. Even while making their assertions, however, my Soviet friends looked fearfully over their shoulders, searching for the commissar. After all, speaking with a Westerner was akin to heresy. As my friends well knew, the wrong thing said in front of the wrong person could result in their disappearance.

It's fashionable in the West today to assert that every culture has its blind spots, and so culturally speaking, everything is relative. But what many Westerners are unaware of, unless they have also spent time in a totalitarian state, is how much more free Westerners are to study their blind spots, to write about them and to publicly attempt to put a spotlight on them.

One blind spot Westerners have is the widespread assumption that everyone is innately good -- or at least capable of being reasoned with. Neuroscience, however, is beginning to provide proof that the dogma of innate rationality and decency is deeply flawed -- at least in a small percentage of people. Instead, it appears that both environment and genetics can occasionally combine to shape people who are naturally duplicitous, amoral and completely incapable of being reasoned with.

When we reflect on these findings, they make sense. After all, was Hitler trustworthy when he suavely insisted he was a man of peace? Could you reason Ahmadinejad out of his firm belief that there are no homosexuals in Iran? Is Russian President Vladimir Putin being honest when he insists he has nothing to do with his enemies' oddly common tendencies to die horrific deaths? Is Hugo Chavez really attempting to give himself extraordinary rights to control every facet of Venezuelan politics for purely altruistic reasons, as he likes to imply? Will Chavez's next step be the elimination of the press that helped spearhead his recent electoral loss?

"Successfully sinister" individuals exist, it seems, in every society. These manipulative individuals often do not have the charm, phenomenal memory or ruthlessness of a Hitler, Putin, Ahmadinejad or Chavez. Instead, they show their nature on a more banal scale: the malevolent department head who terrorizes his underlings, or the long-suffering mother who has been poisoning her children.

No, it appears the real problem is not a religion like Islam, or an ideology like communism. It is, instead, the successfully sinister who roam among us, driven by their amorality to do whatever it takes to gain and maintain control. Social structures, ideologies and religions with little by way of transparency, checks and balances can provide a fast track to the top for such individuals. Even Democratic processes can be subverted if a successfully sinister individual rises to the top and gains the freedom to rewrite the rules. Witness Hitler's election to the presidency that presaged his role as dictator, and Hugo Chavez's similar attempts to reshape his role as the president of Venezuela.

Most of us are imperfect followers of a religion or ideology, and most of us have blind spots. But science is telling us that there are an amoral few among us who are far more imperfect than others. The sizzle of bacon provides the key: We can sometimes be blind to the real nature of human nature.

Barbara Oakley, an associate professor at Oakland University, is the author of "Evil Genes: Why Rome Fell, Hitler Rose, Enron Failed, and My Sister Stole My Mother's Boyfriend."

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