

WEEKEND REVIEW

WEEKEND REVIEW EDITOR STEPHEN SNELGROVE

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2008

SSNELGROVE@VANCOUVERSUN.COM

C



Ara Norenzayan is a social psychologist who wants to know how religion turns people into murderers.

EXPLORING A HOSTILE WORLD

UBC researcher Ara Norenzayan has spent his life studying the religious roots of hatred and goodness, and how it impacts his own life

“It was horrible. When I look back, it was insane.”

Ara Norenzayan

Renowned University of B.C. social psychologist Ara Norenzayan, 37, spent his teenage years in bomb-ravaged Lebanon thinking he could die at any moment in a civil war largely fuelled by religion.

When Norenzayan was young, the kitchen of the Beirut apartment he lived in with his family was blasted through with a bomb's metal shards. He dove for cover in the living room.

Norenzayan's close friend, a soccer goalkeeper, was killed by one of the many car bombs that would suddenly shatter the city's tense quiet.

As Norenzayan and I talked at the window of a café in the Point Grey neighbourhood of Vancouver where he lives, he pointed at a black car parked a few metres from us on 10th Avenue near Alma.

We imagined how that car could blow up at any moment, killing hundreds of innocent Lebanese, or Vancouverites. It elicited a hint of just-below-the-surface terror.

It was a suggestion of the kind of pervasive fear, no doubt mixed with courage, that became a routine aspect of the bewildering civil war that ravaged previously cosmopolitan Lebanon from 1975 to 1990.

Why did such brutal antagonism arise between Lebanon's Palestinian Sunni Muslims and Catholic Maronites, not to mention members of the Druze sect and Israeli Jews?

In the last few years, Norenzayan has earned an international reputation for his ground-breaking research into trying to answer the question: How does religion affect the way people behave, pro and con?

Or, as Norenzayan succinctly puts it: “What is it about religion that can turn nice people into murderers?”

The people who were killing each other in Lebanon were generally well intentioned, he said. “They were not psychopaths. They were nice people doing terrible things out of ideology.”

More than 100,000 people, he said, were murdered during the Middle Eastern country's civil war. The fighting turned Beirut, which had often been described as “the Paris of the East,” into a virtual hellhole.



DOUGLAS TODD
VANCOUVER SUN

COLUMNIST

WEEKEND EXTRA

After leaving Lebanon with his family in 1990, Norenzayan finally returned for the first time several years ago. “When I went back and asked people what they thought happened during the war, they couldn't tell me — because they don't know,” he said over lunch.

“People don't understand the relationship of religion to violence,” he said.

They don't, for that matter, understand the relationship of religion to human existence and psychology. His intention is to bring scientific understanding to bear on faith.

Comparing religion to fire

Norenzayan, who last year was bestowed tenure at the unusually young age of 36, said scientific research into religion has finally become acceptable in higher education, after being virtually shut out of secular academia for almost half a century.

Still, Norenzayan continues to run into people, including academics, who completely dismiss religion. Many others staunchly defend it. “There are so many opinions about religion,” he said, “but so few facts about it.”

Helpfully, Norenzayan compares religion to fire.

Fire can be very good. And fire can be very dangerous. It depends how it's used. Religion “unites and then it divides.”

WEEKEND EXTRA
CONTINUES ON C2

INSIDE



Let boys be boys

A more open attitude toward teen sexuality would help reduce homophobia, writes Alex Sanchez.

Issues, C4



Talk isn't cheap

Free speech can provide the best protection for minorities, writes Barbara Julian.

Books, C6

Urban renewal

Commuter train service runs once again in Baghdad, but ridership is spotty.

Feature, C8

Fall Clearance Sale

up to **50% off** selected models



Luxurious Pocket Coil Euro Top with Memory Foam & latex

Queen Mattress from **\$799**

reg \$1599



Twin, Double & King also sale priced



Cortes

Lift Storage Bed from **\$999**



Malibu

Queensize **\$399**



9 or 12 Drawer

Townhouse

Queensize **\$1899**



Headboard not included

Vitality

4 Drawer Platform
Queensize **\$499**

SLEEP SHOP
your sleep experts

Vancouver
1020 West Broadway
604-267-7860

Richmond
12540 Bridgeport Rd.
604-278-8147

Port Coquitlam
1220-1097 Nicola
604-468-9786

Abbotsford
108-1379 Sumas Way
604-859-7861

Langley
19971 64th Ave.
604-532-7861

Maple Ridge
22239 Lougheed Hwy.
604-466-4252

COVER

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

READER FEEDBACK | We hope you enjoyed this instalment of Weekend Review. As we continue to try to improve our weekly package, we encourage your input on how we can make it better. Please e-mail us with your thoughts at weekendreview@vancouver.sun.com.

‘THE GOOD, BAD AND UGLY’

WEEKEND EXTRA FROM C1

Religion can produce a terrorist Osama bin Laden and a jingoistic demagogue like Pat Robertson. But it can also create a socially concerned Tommy Douglas or a non-violent Dalai Lama.

“Religion can be co-opted to construct large cohesive groups, but for that very same reason it can also be exploited to set one group against another, often violently.”

Since *The Vancouver Sun* published the first media article about Norenzayan’s work in 2004, his team’s findings have been picked up by outlets as diverse as *The New York Times*, *The Economist* and *Slate Magazine*.

He and his colleagues have published articles in leading scientific journals providing data that show, for instance, antagonism towards outsiders is not necessarily a result of belief in God or an active prayer life.

Rather, hatred of others is more likely to be a by-product of people finding an identity in a group, any group. Antagonism is related to dogmatism, whether one is blindly religious or non-religious.

Norenzayan and his colleagues have also extensively studied the relationship between religion and healthy societies, including whether secular societies can be as strong as religious ones.

In other words, Norenzayan, whose life has been harmed by religion-charged conflict, is not out to either praise or bury those who are explicitly religious.

He is open to discovering whatever the evidence suggests about organized religion and individual spirituality — “the good, bad and ugly.”

Despite believing such open-mindedness is the essence of science, and receiving strong support from other faculty in UBC’s psychology department, Norenzayan continues to receive criticism from many quarters.

“I get really nasty e-mails.”

Religious people will tell him he’s dismissing religion by trying to explain it psychologically. Atheists will object to his research because they believe it might make it harder to eradicate religion. And some scientists still argue religion is not a bona fide subject of exploration.

Church members targeted in civil war

Norenzayan conveyed a sense of calm as we spoke.

But he hasn’t always been this way.

He readily admits he lived in embattled Beirut as if any minute might be his last on Earth.

Norenzayan’s own family’s religious origins are in the Armenian Orthodox church, whose members were targeted during Lebanon’s civil war for trying to remain neutral.

In an effort to feel normal amid the chaos, he and others continued to go to school, work at jobs and play sports, not to mention take part in religious practices. To quell ever-present anxiety, many also went “with a vengeance” to nightclubs, dances and parties.

After 15 years of the fluctuating uncertainty and mayhem of Lebanon’s war, Norenzayan’s family finally left Beirut in 1990. It turned out to be six months before the war ended.

They travelled to the United States, where Norenzayan, who was breaking out of his family’s small-business tradition by showing a predilection for academia, studied at California State University in Fresno and then did graduate studies at the University of Michigan.

Like many PhD students he lived an intense life, jacked up on six cups of coffee a day. He excelled at learning, but his nerves were jangled.

Memories of Lebanon simmered below the surface. “I wouldn’t have been surprised if I had symptoms of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder].”

He was, for instance, set off by loud noises, which reminded him of shellings and car bombs.

To find a way to cope, he began mindfulness meditation, and a bit of yoga.

He continues both to this day, along with sailing and jogging through the streets and parks of Point Grey.

Nestled behind a small oriental-style screen divider in his study is a one-metre-by-one-metre space that contains a meditation pillow and candle. It’s where he practises.

Asked to describe his own religious views, Norenzayan said he’s “agnostic.”

Even though he finds a sense of cultural and group identity in the Armenian Orthodox Church, he attends less and less.

“I see value in religion. I can understand why people want spirituality. At the same time I can’t bring myself to believe in God.”

He doesn’t do meditation and yoga for explicitly religious reasons. He engages it in more of the “secular but spiritual” way that so many people of the Pacific Northwest get in touch with their inner selves.

“I wished I could be religious, but I couldn’t do it,” Norenzayan said.

“But I still want to live a rich, meaningful life. Meditation was a way to explore my spiritual questions and longings. It’s a way to cultivate presence and peace of mind.”

The fact Norenzayan’s early life was filled with unpredictably savage violence and death may partly explain his continuing fascination with organized religion and personal spirituality.



VANCOUVER SUN FILES

Ara Norenzayan, shown here as a boy, spent much of his youth in war-ravaged Lebanon where he once had to dive for cover to escape a bomb blast. Today, the social psychologist’s ground-breaking research has earned him an international reputation.

His own research suggests one reason why that could be the case. One of his ground-breaking studies found that subjects who are reminded of death are far more likely than others to be open to religion, to consider belief in supernatural agents.

His experiments were among the first to provide “solid empirical evidence” to back up theories by philosophers Soren Kierkegaard and Simon Fraser University’s Ernest Becker that humans become religious because they’re capable of recognizing they will die.

When it comes to death and violence, another innovative research project Norenzayan’s team worked on involved Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jewish settlers.

Against conventional wisdom, Norenzayan and co-researchers Jeremy Ginges and Ian Hansen discovered no correlation between how much Palestinian Muslims and Israeli settlers prayed and how much they were inclined to support violence.

However, the study did show a link between how often Palestinian Muslims and Israeli settlers worshipped at their religious institutions and how much they would support attacks on their rivals.

In other words, violence was linked to group behaviour, not spiritual practice.

A ‘leap of faith’ can be beneficial

In many ways, Norenzayan follows one of the founders of modern psychology, the great American thinker William James, who taught that “the truth value of religion is not its only value.”

Whether certain metaphysical beliefs are provable or not, James taught they can be valuable simply because they can positively affect human behaviour.

Like falling in love, Norenzayan said a “leap of faith” can be beneficial. “Neither is inherently bad.”

Personally, he said he is not comfortable with being a hard-core atheist. It doesn’t feel accurate to conclude that humans are just “pieces of self-replicating meat.”

Since atheism can easily slip into philosophical nihilism, the belief that life is meaningless, Norenzayan said there is a debate arising in psychology about whether atheists actually exist at a deep psychological level.

“At the end of the day, even the most die-hard atheist wants to live a meaningful life,” said Norenzayan, who adds he often collaborates with researchers who are atheist.

Norenzayan expects there are inherent psy-

chological roots to religion and spirituality, whether people recognize them or not.

He suspects deep down that even atheists believe they are more than random bits of physical matter.

“Atheists are going to find sources of meaning that are not derived from rationality, not derived from science. They come from inside, from internal experience.”

Even though atheists might deny the existence of a “soul,” or psyche, Norenzayan and colleague Will Gervais are researching whether all of us might subconsciously believe we have “souls” that are independent of our physical bodies.

Somewhat like Yale psychologist Paul Bloom and many process philosophers, Norenzayan said most of us feel the mental aspects of our selves are not reducible to the physical.

“When we say, ‘My body is shaking right now,’ we’re saying there is an immaterial self that inhabits our body.”

Curious about how widespread atheism among a population might affect a society, Norenzayan has become intrigued by Denmark.

In that small Nordic country, he said, only 25 per cent of the population believes in God, compared to more than 90 per cent in the U.S., 80 per cent in Canada and 70 per cent in B.C.

Since religion throughout history has been effective at creating cohesive societies among people who are not biologically related, he wants to explore how it is that Denmark has developed into a generous, communitarian state.

In studies of altruism, Norenzayan and co-researcher Azim Shariff have found there is more cooperation among religious societies than non-religious ones, especially when group survival is under threat. Religion through history has encouraged cohesion among genetically unrelated people.

In their fall article in the prestigious journal *Science*, which reviewed the literature on the scientific study of religion, Norenzayan and Shariff found many things, including that belief in God reduces cheating and selfish behaviour.

In one psychological experiment out of dozens surveyed by Norenzayan and Shariff, children were explicitly instructed not to look in a box and then left alone with it.

“Those who were previously told that a fictional supernatural agent — Princess Alice — was watching were significantly less likely to

peek inside the forbidden box.”

Norenzayan and Shariff also found that religious people tend to be more helpful and generous than non-religious people — on two conditions. Those conditions are that they believe their helpful behaviour will enhance their reputation among their peers, and that they have been freshly reminded of their belief in supernatural agents.

But if researchers remove those two conditions, Norenzayan said, “all of a sudden you don’t find any differences” between the behaviour of the religious and non-religious.

Norenzayan theorizes that people who believe in God assume the existence of an all-knowing “supernatural watcher” who monitors their behaviour, which makes them act more generously.

Nevertheless, Norenzayan said the five-page *Science* article does not necessarily contradict those who argue religion exacerbates conflict between cultures.

That’s because the UBC researchers also discovered that religious people are often more generous and helpful (or “pro-social”) to members of their own religion, not necessarily to outsiders.

The *Science* article, titled *The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality*, said even though religion has been useful in creating more helpful behaviour, it has no monopoly on it.

The beneficial role that an all-knowing, morally concerned God has played in history, Norenzayan said, is in some cases being replaced by non-religious mechanisms.

“Today, religions are not necessary to have large moral communities. Just take a look at a society like Denmark, a very cooperative society that is one of the least religious.”

Black-and-white views eschewed

Norenzayan is intrigued when I suggest the possibility most residents of Denmark may have subconsciously embraced the communal Christian ethics of their state-supported Lutheran church, but turfed the religious teachings in part because of inadequate metaphysics. He agrees: “The large moral communities of today may not have come into existence without religion.”

This way of thinking also dovetails with his research suggesting that a cohesive society — with a value-laden school system, generous welfare, policing, courts and social surveillance — can be as effective as religion at creating cooperative people.

While Norenzayan has found some people behave more “pro-socially” when researchers have reminded them of their belief in God, he said many of us behave more ethically when we’re simply reminded of words such as “civil,” or because a police cruiser drives by.

In his important work, Norenzayan is creating as many questions — psychological, social and metaphysical — as he is answering.

But he is justifiably proud to say that it is time to move the study of religion away from strong, divisive opinion to the gathering of empirical evidence.

Norenzayan eschews dogma, religious or scientific. “I don’t have much tolerance for a black-and-white view of religion, or of anything for that matter.”

As he pursues his laboratory experiments and philosophical inquiries and strives to make personal sense of his tumultuous early years in religion-torn Beirut, he says he has learned to live with ambiguity.

“I think it’s the only honest way.”

dtodd@vancouver.sun.com

To read Douglas Todd’s blog, go to www.vancouver.sun.com/theseach



VANCOUVER SUN FILES

Ara Norenzayan, seen here visiting his home city of Beirut in 2005 (his first trip back in 15 years), says ‘even the most diehard atheist wants to live a meaningful life.’