

# Meeting of minds

We are all capable of thinking fundamentalist thoughts. It's when like-minded people get together that the trouble starts, says **Michael Brooks**

SCOTT ATRAN knows a thing or two about fundamentalists, and as far as he's concerned, they are nice people. "I certainly find very little hatred; they act out of love," he says. "These people are very compassionate." Atran, who studies group dynamics at the University of Michigan, is talking about suicide bombers, extremists by anyone's standards and not representative of fundamentalist ideology in general (*New Scientist*, 23 July, page 18). But surprisingly, much of what Atran has discovered about suicide bombers helps to explain the psychology of all fundamentalist movements.

Ideas about the nature of fundamentalist belief initially drew heavily on work from the 1950s, when psychologists were trying to explain why some people were drawn to authoritarian ideologies such as Nazism. Guided by that research, psychologists focused on individuals, looking for personality traits, modes of thinking and even psychological flaws that might mark fundamentalists out from other people. The conclusion they came to was that there is no real difference between fundamentalists and everybody else. "The fundamentalist mentality is part of human nature," writes Stuart Sim, a cultural theorist at the University of Sunderland in the UK. "All of us are capable of exhibiting this kind of behaviour."

Attention has now turned away from individual psychology to focus on the power of the group. "We evolved to have close and intimate group contacts: we cooperate to compete," says Atran. The psychology of fundamentalism is, literally, more than the sum of its parts; taken individually, fundamentalists are rather unremarkable. "The notion that you might be able to find something in a fundamentalist's brain

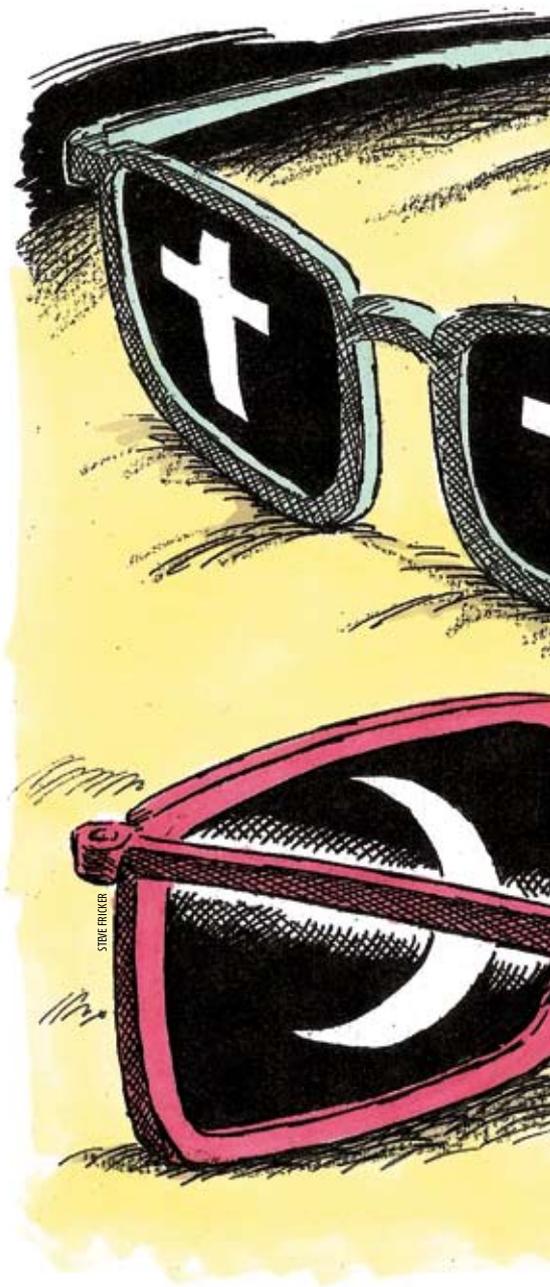
scan is a non-starter," says John Brooke, a professor of science and religion at the University of Oxford.

Much of the research in this area has been done on Christian fundamentalists in North America. A study by Daniel Batson of the University of Kansas and Larry Ventis of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, for example, showed that fundamentalists do not have an abnormally high regard for, or willingness to acquiesce to, authority figures. Studies also show no general inclination towards prejudice, at least in areas where people's behaviour does not conflict with their moral values. Racist they are not; homophobic is a different matter.

And despite the fact that fundamentalist thinking is often portrayed as simplistic, this too is not borne out by research. Measures of cognitive complexity, which describes how an individual combines, classifies and processes information, show that fundamentalists are no different from the wider population. In general they operate solid, logical and sophisticated chains of thinking, albeit thinking that is based on non-negotiable articles of faith. "There are some very sophisticated attempts to defend what to most of our eyes are very unsophisticated positions," says Brooke. "They have a world view that, within its own frame of reference, has a degree of rationality."

In general, fundamentalists seem to be well-balanced people. They score highly on subjective measures of marital happiness, optimism and self-control, and have a low incidence of depression and anxiety.

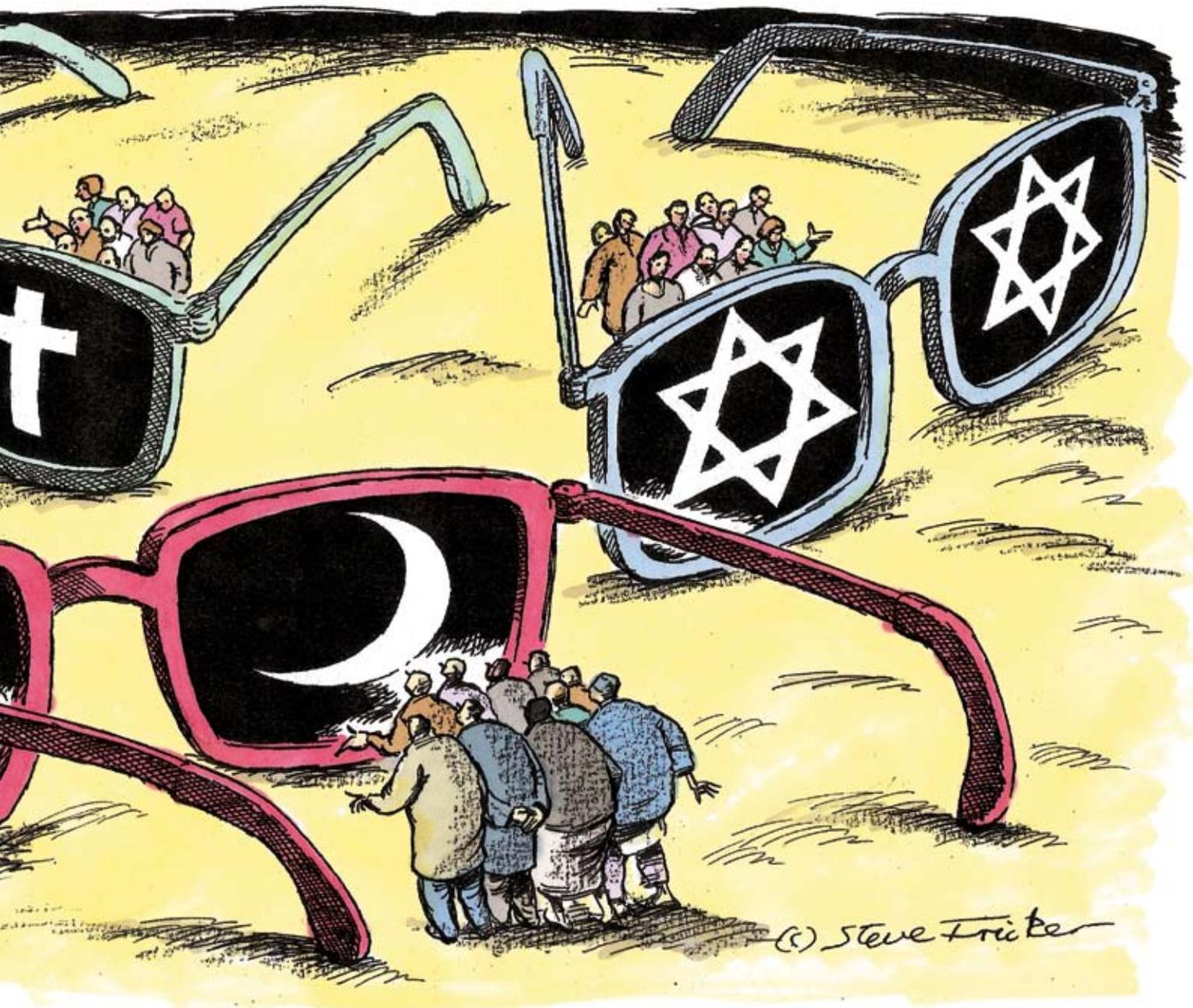
An obvious explanation for this is that fundamentalist belief is fulfilling some hard-wired psychological need for certainty and security in a world where such comforts are hard to come by. But this cannot be the whole



story, because fundamentalists do not choose to become ardent believers simply because of the psychological benefits this brings. They belong to the much larger group of people that psychologists class as "intrinsically" religious: they absorb a creed, believe it is the right thing to believe, and do their utmost to work out its implications in their lives. "Extrinsically" religious people, who join a faith movement for the spin-off benefits, are different, and tend to be more racially intolerant, for example.

## Sense of identity

Fundamentalists, then – at least those of the Christian variety – tend to be happy, sincere and healthy. According to Sara Savage, who researches the psychology of religion at the University of Cambridge, that may be because



they believe they are playing a role in the greatest story ever told. "Story is probably the biggest form of security we have as humans. It's very powerful in giving you identity."

Secular western culture, on the other hand, doesn't provide a "grand narrative" to participate in, Savage points out. It offers multiple options for making sense of the world around us – a mess that most human minds struggle to deal with. In evolutionary terms, it's really new to us. "I don't think we're that comfortable with it," Savage says. This, she says, is why the kind of world view contained in a religious text resonates with people, and why they are inclined to stick with it at all costs.

Savage suggests that humanity's ways of thinking, of organising, recording and processing information, matured during a period of history when people only had

## "The Christians' struggle to validate their beliefs has ignited a global holy war"

to deal with one world view: a theistic one. This is reflected in most sacred texts, which were written during this period. "Having one world view feels quite natural to human beings," she says.

But while a rigid adherence to a religious world view may be psychologically unremarkable, when a few of those minds get together in a group, things start to happen. "It's mostly small group dynamics rather than

personal psychology or indoctrination," Atran says. He portrays human psychology as having evolved an array of buttons just waiting to be pressed by environmental conditions. Group psychology, Atran thinks, is a particularly responsive set of buttons because group activity, especially in the family, has been so important in our evolutionary development.

However, the group response can be triggered by things that have nothing to do with the evolutionary pressures that formed them: a shared ideology, for example. The group's activities push the "family" button, Atran says, and loyalty to the new group becomes paramount. "By the time the group is formed, they are emotionally felt to be family," he says. "Somehow the same wiring is triggered." In the end, members of the group do anything to maintain the bond and to ▶



reinforce the centrality of their group's beliefs.

So what happens next? Because fundamentalist groups are at odds the dominant culture, maintaining the group's fundamentalist world view demands isolation from that culture. The first casualty is tolerance of diversity. But even then it is hard to make the isolation total, with the result that Christian fundamentalists living in the US, for example,

compartmentalise their experiences of the world. And that inevitably leads to inner conflict. "All humans do it, but the more we do it, the worse the psychological outcomes," Savage says.

But how does this kind of conflict translate into a social war, like that being waged over the role of science? Part of the answer lies in fundamentalists' need to bolster group

identity by reframing their beliefs in the terms of the dominant culture. In a secular, scientific culture, Savage points out, a certain level of evidence is generally required in order for knowledge to count and for individuals to act on it. Fundamentalists respond by attempting to "prove" their core beliefs: they "science-up" their faith, framing it in a way that they think ought to make sense to a scientific culture. Their claims then become, in their eyes at least, as valid as science's claims. No wonder scientists find fundamentalists' claims so infuriating: they are operating on patently false credentials.

However, this tactic has backfired, with damaging consequences. According to James Barr, professor of Hebrew Bible at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, and author of a number of books critical of Christian fundamentalism, these false credentials have produced a "deep intellectual self-distrust" that shows itself in an insatiable craving for intellectual credibility. That is why creationists strive to have a debate with scientists, and why they trumpet any academic qualifications they might possess. It may also explain why, for instance, George Gilder, a senior fellow of the fundamentalist Discovery Institute in Seattle, invokes the uncertainty principle of quantum theory to shore up a faith-based philosophy.

But to no avail. According to Barr, fundamentalists have failed to gain intellectual acceptance even within mainstream Christian scholarship. Because the fundamentalists come to the Bible with a partisan agenda, they are unable to offer any striking insights. As a result, fundamentalist biblical scholarship is "sterile", he says. Fundamentalist Christianity is widely considered as irrelevant to modern theology as it is to modern science.

And that, for the fundamentalists, is a terrible blow. Irrelevance is not something that people with this group psychology can tolerate. A movement that considers itself a key player in the greatest story ever told can't afford to be perceived as peripheral.

At this point, the desperation sets in.

Today's struggles are only the latest manifestation of this psychology. A glance at the history books shows it is not difficult to make a link between fundamentalist Christian groups' sense of participating in a story of cosmic significance and the rise of Islamic extremism. In fact, Atran says, it can be argued that the group psychology of fundamentalist Christians, their struggle to fulfil the prophecies of the Bible and thus to validate their cherished beliefs, has ignited a global holy war. "People attribute Islamic fundamentalism to Islam, but I think it has as much – or more – to do with Christian fundamentalism," Atran says. "You'll find no apocalyptic visions in Islam; it comes from the book of *Revelation*. That's what is being played out today." ●

## Inside the mind of a suicide bomber

If you want to get into the mind of a suicide bomber, try this experiment. Ask someone who is married to hand over their wedding ring for a week. Offer them a large sum of money to do so, and tell them that at the end of the week they'll be able to retrieve their wedding ring from a choice of two: their own ring or an identical replica of equal value. They won't necessarily be able to tell which is their ring, so they might end up with the wrong one.

"There are only two groups of people that have ever accepted the bargain," says Scott Atran of the University of Michigan, who has carried out this experiment numerous times. One is divorcees. The other is people from cultures in which wedding rings aren't important.

Atran carries out the experiment to show just how strongly we are motivated to make emotional commitments, and to compartmentalise those commitments away from our everyday role as what Atran calls "economic man". These commitments "are grounded in the emotional underpinnings of people's identities," says Atran, and they are non-negotiable. "You don't trade who you are."

And that, Atran claims, can be used to explain why suicide bombers go as far as they do. They are emotionally committed to their ideology, their goal and their group: it becomes who they are, and nothing can pull them away from it. "Suicide bombers never backtrack," Atran says. The bonds formed between bombers in a terrorist cell

are too strong. "Once you've seen your buddies go over and die, you can't very well pull out."

It is certainly not about gaining rewards for their families or themselves; it has nothing to do with paying the bills or attentive virgins in paradise. The act of suicide bombing is all about a commitment to the highest cause. "It's pretty striking how deeply committed they are. They are committed to one another, but by the time they're ready to go it is also a commitment to the ennobling idea of martyrdom." Atran recently saw a Sulawesi mujahedin fighter break down in tears when his 16-year-old comrade died in battle. "He said to me, 'That guy gets all the luck; he's a martyr now. I've been fighting for four years and I've yet to be martyred'."