

I came from where? Approaching the science of human origins from religious perspectives – what is the role of aggression in human evolution?

This video was recorded at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History on March 28, 2011

- Audience member: 00:19 I have more questions than I'm going to be allowed, but just something occurred to me as Mr. Ed Jordis was speaking about our adaptability in terms of how we've spread and how we're so successful as a species. I often hear about our great adaptability. I very infrequently hear about our aggression as to how we're such a successful species. We once had all these different homos and they're all gone. It's just us now. I wonder if you could speak to that, the place of aggression in us, and perhaps part of why we're in the trouble we're in too.
- Fred Edwords: 01:08 Well, I'm also going to ask Rick Potts, I suppose, to help with that because he's the scientist. But I think the important thing is, is that we don't always know why all of these species died out. We don't know that it was due to aggression. We don't know that it was that we killed them off. That doesn't seem to necessarily be the view. There seems to be some evidence in fact, that there may have been homo sapiens crossbreeding with Neanderthals. Now that doesn't mean we didn't also war with them, but the evidence doesn't clearly indicate that I don't think. (01:46) Part of the issue is that yes, we have aggression. We have aggression in the fact that we fought many, many wars, and yet despite all of that, there's so many of us anyway. The ends of wars tend to cause a baby boom. So we tend to replenish ourselves after we've done terrible damage to each other. So yes, we are aggressive. We're a mixed bag. And that's why we've had to invent ideas like human rights and things like that. And try to find better ways to live because we are this mixed bag of characteristics. We have the ability to have communities as is obvious. We also have the ability to make war as is obvious. If war doesn't kill us all off because of our incredible weapons now, it may be something else that does, and we have to be on the alert for our weaknesses as well as our strengths or we won't survive. And we just have to look at the evidence honestly and fearlessly.
- Rick Potts: 02:47 Perhaps I'll try to comment a little bit about that. The whole history of trying to understand the matter of aggression in who we are as human beings and its role in evolutionary history has been a very tricky one. For example, Raymond Dart, who was

the person who uncovered and studied the first fossil of Australopithecus in Africa in the 1920s and anatomus based in South Africa, wanted to try to wrap his mind around the horrors of World War II and came up with the idea based on broken bones from one of the Australopithecus sites and then several of the Australopithecus sites in South Africa, that we evolved largely because we were killer apes. And the basis of his idea was shown to be incorrect from studies in the 1960s. And it has kind of undergone a similar sort of thing that you can trace back to a Hobbesian versus a Russo type of world. Are we killers and competitors and aggressors toward others and life is nasty short-ish and brutish, or are we noble savages? (04:16) The same thing occurs when you look at modern day primates and Richard Wrangham and others have made arguments that we are inherently aggressive. Look at chimpanzees, that we must have shared a common ancestor that was very aggressive. And then others will say, we have an equally close relationship biologically to Bonobos who are incredibly peaceful, and there has been no evidence ever of one bonobo killing another. So there are particular reasons why that's the case. (04:47)

In any case, it's a kind of a checkered history about how to make of that. The main thing that we have emphasized, or at least I have emphasized in some of my writings when people look for the matter of aggression, is that we have no evidence of killing fields. People want to see say modern day warfare as being the same kind of reason as why the homo sapiens must've killed off the Neanderthals. We have no evidence of that. (05:16) The matter of adaptability that Fred has emphasized, partly as a result of our own research and presentations in the exhibit hall and in the companion volume, is that we do know that part of the context of human evolution was an astonishing degree of environmental variability. And that what's surprising about that, is that the traditional view of human evolution is that it was one stable ancestral environment to which we can owe our humanness, the African Savanna or the Ice Age. But we now know that that's not the case. So I think that that's partly why he emphasized that was because of the empirical data about environments, where the empirical data about aggression is very, very fuzzy.

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