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Americans, it seems, have never been more polarized about religion and politics. With minds made up and combat-ready, we have a hard time bridging the chasms that divide us.

In *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, explains why. A moral perspective, he argues, is a feature of our evolutionary design. Morality has made it possible for human beings — unlike any other creatures — to forge large, cohesive, cooperative groups. Morality also blinds as it binds, producing conflicts between groups, tribes and countries.

Drawing on fascinating studies in cognitive, behavioral and evolutionary psychology, *The Righteous Mind* is splendidly written, sophisticated and stimulating. It may well change how you think and talk about politics, religion and human nature.

Arguments on these topics often go nowhere, Haidt asserts, "because moral reasons are the tail wagged by the intuitive dog." We make moral judgments immediately and emotionally. They are based on foundational "receptors" — Haidt's candidates are "Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity and Liberty" — that are innate but develop differently in different cultures and vary in emphasis and intensity from individual to individual. Whether the subject is UFOs, abortion or tax reform, we almost always generate reasons as after-the-fact justifications for conclusions we want to reach.

Haidt makes a compelling case that Republicans understand moral psychology better than Democrats. Their ads, slogans and speeches go right for the gut, and they activate all six receptors. The Democrats, by contrast, are more emotionally cool (think Dukakis, Gore and Kerry); they stick exclusively to Care, Fairness and Liberty, disdaining Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity as dangerous and damaging.

Religion, according to Haidt, is their biggest blind spot. Focusing on the faulty reasoning of believers, the left undervalues religion’s role in preserving moral capital. When secular organizations call for sacrifice, their members make cost-benefit calculations. Church congregants are far more likely to work together, trust one another and help those in need.
Haidt acknowledges that religion also promotes the "we-they" thinking that threatens contemporary American society. He has not discovered the magic bullet to make it go away. Haidt does note, however, that when individuals are prevented from making snap judgments and presented with alternatives, they are somewhat more likely to re-evaluate their preconceived notions. His book can provide a pause that refreshes righteous minds, giving them a moment and a method to empathize across a moral divide.

Read an excerpt of The Righteous Mind