

ican Fork, twenty minutes down the interstate from where he is now imprisoned. Inside the brick duplex he found his fifteen-month-old niece, Erica, standing in her crib, smiling up at him. "I spoke to her for a minute," Lafferty recalls. "I told her, 'I'm not sure what this is all about, but apparently it's God's will that you leave this world; perhaps we can talk about it later.'" And then he ended her life with a ten-inch boning knife.

After dispatching Erica, he calmly walked into the kitchen and used the same knife to kill the baby's mother. Now, seventeen years after committing these two murders, he insists, very convincingly, that he has never felt any regret for the deed, or shame.

Like his older brother, Ron, Dan Lafferty was brought up as a pious Mormon. "I've always been interested in God and the Kingdom of God," he says. "It's been the center of my focus since I was a young child." And he is certain God intended for him to kill Brenda and Erica Lafferty: "It was like someone had taken me by the hand that day and led me comfortably through everything that happened. Ron had received a revelation from God that these lives were to be taken. I was the one who was supposed to do it. And if God wants something to be done, it will be done. You don't want to offend Him by refusing to do His work."

These murders are shocking for a host of reasons, but no aspect of the crimes is more disturbing than Lafferty's complete and determined absence of remorse. How could an apparently sane, avowedly pious man kill a blameless woman and her baby so viciously, without the barest flicker of emotion? Whence did he derive the moral justification? What filled him with such certitude? Any attempt to answer such questions must plumb those murky sectors of the heart and head that prompt most of us to believe in God—and compel an impassioned few, predictably, to carry that irrational belief to its logical end.

There is a dark side to religious devotion that is too often ignored or denied. As a means of motivating people to be cruel or inhumane—as a means of inciting evil, to borrow the vocabulary of the devout—there may be no more potent force than religion. When the subject of religiously inspired bloodshed comes up, many Americans immediately think of Islamic fundamentalism, which is to be expected in the wake of

the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington. But men have been committing heinous acts in the name of God ever since mankind began believing in deities, and extremists exist within all religions. Muhammad is not the only prophet whose words have been used to sanction barbarism; history has not lacked for Christians, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, and even Buddhists who have been motivated by scripture to butcher innocents. Plenty of these religious extremists have been home-grown, corn-fed Americans.

Faith-based violence was present long before Osama bin Laden, and it will be with us long after his demise. Religious zealots like bin Laden, David Koresh, Jim Jones, Shoko Asahara,* and Dan Lafferty are common to every age, just as zealots of other stripes are. In any human endeavor, some fraction of its practitioners will be motivated to pursue that activity with such concentrated focus and unalloyed passion that it will consume them utterly. One has to look no further than individuals who feel compelled to devote their lives to becoming concert pianists, say, or climbing Mount Everest. For some, the province of the extreme holds an allure that's irresistible. And a certain percentage of such fanatics will inevitably fixate on matters of the spirit.

The zealot may be outwardly motivated by the anticipation of a great reward at the other end—wealth, fame, eternal salvation—but the real recompense is probably the obsession itself. This is no less true for the religious fanatic than for the fanatical pianist or fanatical mountain climber. As a result of his (or her) infatuation, existence overflows with purpose. Ambiguity vanishes from the fanatic's worldview; a narcissistic sense of self-assurance displaces all doubt. A delicious rage quickens his pulse, fueled by the sins and shortcomings of lesser mortals, who are

* Asahara is the charismatic "Holy Pope" and "Venerated Master" of Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese sect that carried out a deadly 1995 attack in the Tokyo subways using sarin nerve gas. The theological tenets of Aum Shinrikyo (which means "Supreme Truth") are drawn from Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism. At the time of the subway attack, the sect's worldwide membership was estimated to be as high as forty thousand, although it has now dropped to perhaps one thousand. According to terrorism expert Kyle B. Olson, Asahara's followers can still "be seen in Aum-owned houses wearing bizarre electric headsets, supposedly designed to synchronize their brain waves with the cult's leader," who is currently incarcerated in Japan.

soiling the world wherever he looks. His perspective narrows until the last remnants of proportion are shed from his life. Through immoderation, he experiences something akin to rapture.

Although the far territory of the extreme can exert an intoxicating pull on susceptible individuals of all bents, extremism seems to be especially prevalent among those inclined by temperament or upbringing toward religious pursuits. Faith is the very antithesis of reason, injudiciousness a crucial component of spiritual devotion. And when religious fanaticism supplants ratiocination, all bets are suddenly off. Anything can happen. Absolutely anything. Common sense is no match for the voice of God—as the actions of Dan Lafferty vividly attest.

It is the aim of this book to cast some light on Lafferty and his ilk. If trying to understand such people is a daunting exercise, it also seems a useful one—for what it may tell us about the roots of brutality, perhaps, but even more for what might be learned about the nature of faith.