Terrorism has become mundane. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the world has become a much more dangerous place. I recall, in the middle to late 1990s, reading that Osama bin Laden was America's worst nightmare, but no one paid much attention until it was too late. A similar phenomenon has just happened with the group calling itself ISIS. We have known about the group for some time, but the country—and media—only recently has paid attention to their diabolical actions, brought squarely into view with beheadings of a few unfortunate Westerners. The cruelty attributed to this group of thugs—beheadings, mass executions, ethnic and religious persecution and cleansing—can only be characterized as medieval. It is as though terrorism has become so common that it has faded into the background: something that we reluctantly accept as part of our modern world.

I have trouble explaining the behavior of these men—and a few women—who claim to be motivated by religion. True, religion has motivated all manner of cruelty and mayhem since time immemorial, but what we are witnessing today is—I think—unique. From what we know, many persons associated with ISIS had a middle-class upbringing in families not associated with extremism, and are educated. These are not the poorly educated, disaffected terrorists of the past. Many of them seem to be relatively newly converted to their religion, but more than a few have criminal backgrounds. This motley crew appears to make up their own rules of behavior, based on their peculiar interpretation of Islam, which Muslim leaders around the world have rejected. So how do we explain this phenomenon in psychiatric terms?

Jerrold M. Post, a psychiatrist who was a consultant for the CIA, once described bin Laden as a “malignant narcissist.” He possessed a charismatic style in combination with his narcissistic view of himself that attracted followers. This led him to believe he had a special mission through Al Qaeda to spread terrorism to the West as a form of payback. ISIS leaders do not share the charisma of bin Laden, and seem even more bent on death and destruction Many of their leaders, in my opinion, are sociopaths whose main goal is world domination, beginning with a “caliphate”—a political-religious state comprising the Muslim community—and lack the kind of religiosity bin Laden had. In truth, people such as this defy psychiatric diagnoses.

I hope to see many of you at our next AACP/Current Psychiatry CME meeting. This will be in Las Vegas, Nevada at the Venetian Hotel, December 11 to 13, 2014.

Donald W. Black, MD
Editor-in-Chief