

## Tribes and tribal gods

By [David Williams](#)

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It's peculiar, of late, the degree to which the idea of tribalism has been surfacing in the world. With every act of brutality on the part of ISIS, every act of monstrosity from Boko Haram, every dark and unpleasant bit of nastiness out there, it seems tribalism is to blame.

"It's these backwards monsters and their *tribal* god," or so goes the refrain.

"Tribal" becomes shorthand for insular, stunted, and ignorant, snarling clans of highlanders ever butchering one another, the Hatfields and the McCoys firing potshots. It is juxtaposed with the deep virtues of modern and "postmodern" thinking. We are, after all, the ones who make decisions based on reason and enlightened self-interest.

We're not *tribal*.

Perhaps that's true. But as much as the concept of the tribe has been getting bad press lately, I think it's not entirely deserved. I think that, mostly, because of my recent doctoral research into the dynamics of small faith communities. Sure, little gatherings can be bitter, unpleasant, and toxic. Tribal relations can be messy. But not every church-tribe is Westboro Baptist.

Small communities can also be healthy and warm and gracious. They can be places of learning and mutual support. They are places of belonging, of the interrelationship of persons on a profound level.

Tribes are the intimate communities—by affinity or by kin—that constitute one of the most elemental forms of human relationship. They're missing, to large degree, in our broader society, where we are fragmented off into demographic silos, or regimented into systems and structures that resemble industrial production.

These are certainly effective and efficient and convenient. But they are not organically *human*.

As [Carol Howard Merritt pointed out in her book](#) (can I call it her "classic book" yet? hmmm) those alternate systems of organization tend to leave us hungry for ways of being together that resonate more with our essential humanity. In this shattered, diffuse, scattered age, that's a major problem.

So when I hear "tribal" described as functionally synonymous with "ignorant" or "violent," I rankle a wee bit.

Sure, a "tribal god" is a problem. But only if the tribe is the god.

It is equally a problem if a nation is the god. Or an ideology is the god. Or if we ourselves are the focus of our worship.

Six of one, half dozen of the other.

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