The Social Origins of Belief Systems

It seems very unlikely that any society has ever existed in which individual members have thought the murder of others to be acceptable. Although the odd serial killer does occasionally surface in any society, most of us think of one as an exceptional aberration, or even as "non-human".

There have always been rules about when men may kill other men – usually outsiders as opposed to insiders.

So killing missionaries may be perfectly acceptable . . . .

...but not fathers-in-law from neighbouring tribes!

Such moral understandings are often codified and regulated by religious and legal taboos of various kinds. Human beings seem reluctant to accept that morality is something invented by themselves and so tend to legitimize moral rules by mythologizing their origins: "The Great White Parrot says stealing is wrong". The story of ethics is to some extent a description of attempts like these to legitimize morality.