

The God Virus

The God Virus

**How Religion Infects
Our Lives and Culture**

Darrel W. Ray, Ed.D.

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Dedicated to
Dan Dana

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The process of writing, interviewing and researching gave me the opportunity to hear the stories of many who have escaped religion. Most of their stories reflect the following four themes:

1. Events that opened their eyes to religious manipulation in their life or family;
2. Long hidden or suppressed doubts about the teachings;
3. Their ultimate act or declaration of liberation from organized religion; and
4. The double-edged sword of living without the crutch of a supernatural friend and learning to accept full responsibility for life.

Many of them recounted both the terror and the relief they felt after leaving religion behind. Terror at realizing there was no longer an imaginary friend; relief that no one was looking over their shoulder any more. Several described the experience as similar to that of a child learning to go to sleep without a favorite teddy bear. Others described it as simply growing up or outgrowing the need for the imaginary friends of childhood.

I don't want to leave the impression that everybody who contributed and assisted with this book agrees with it completely. Each of us has our own journey. My hope is that the questions and tools this book offers will lead readers to critically examine the influence of religion in their life and culture.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the friends and colleagues who helped me improve this book in many ways. My son, Aaron, was the initial inspiration. Our talks about religion and philosophy led me to believe there is much to share from my life and academic training. Dr. Dan Dana, my lifelong friend and colleague, provided encouragement and support at every step. Our monthly supper talks helped refine many ideas. It is a profound gift to have such a loyal friend.

Missy Andeel, Susan Henrie and Jaime Vogt provided remarkable feedback that demonstrated to me the power of the god virus metaphor. I am grateful for their efforts and willingness to share their experiences with me.

Susan Hart and Judy Roepke stayed close to the project, offering support and feedback at each stage. Our many talks and shared experiences resulted in new ideas and some changes.

Life is full of coincidences. On a plane to Europe, I met Ceil Wirth and struck up a conversation with her about this book. She subsequently asked to read the manuscript. Her questions and editing suggestions led to many instrumental changes. We do not agree on everything, but her ideas and encouragement were welcome.

Other readers provided valuable insights and shared their experiences. Chris Coope, Julie Price, Dave Carleski, Michele Lubbers, Janet Boehm and my wonderful colleague, Laura Northcutt, each unselfishly gave time and energy to this project.

I am grateful also to Kenny Nipp, Earl Doherty and Hemant Mehta, who saw the value of the manuscript and encouraged me to see it through to completion.

Thanks to Shayne Schuldt, who did a wonderful job in the design and graphics of the book, including the cover.

I am also indebted to my two editors, Kirsten McBride and Deborah Shouse, for their attention to detail and critical eye.

Although I cannot use their names here, I am grateful to the many religious people I interviewed as part of my research for the book. While some were open to discussing and critiquing my ideas, most did not wish to be acknowledged.

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INTRODUCTION

"The chains men bear they forged themselves. Strike off their chains and they will weep for their lost security."

-John Passmore, Australian philosopher

Every day religion affects us in ways we may not realize. It makes your Uncle Ned spend hours praying for you; it gives your Baptist neighbor a reason to reject her own child who married a Catholic; it teaches your Pentecostal sister to spank her children to keep them from going to hell; it requires a Catholic priest to deny his sex drive; it causes people to give enormous amounts of money to religious organizations; and causes you to avoid talking to your cousin Jennie for fear she may try to convert you to Jehovah's Witnesses. Religion has both obvious and subtle influences – on you and on society.

This book explores the impact of religion on you and your world. It draws open the curtain of mystery and offers ways to understand and make informed decisions about religion.

Have you ever wondered what makes religion so powerful? What makes people profess deep faith even as they act in ways that betray that faith? What makes people blind to the irrationalities of their own religion yet see clearly the problems of other religions? How does it weave its way into our political system? If these and similar questions interest you, this book will help you understand its power in you, your family and your culture.

For thousands of years, religion penetrated societies, largely unexplained and unchallenged. It simply existed. Those who attempted to question or expose religion were often persecuted, books burned, excommunicated, or even executed. From Galileo to Darwin, Salman Rushdie to Theo van Gogh,¹ it could be hazardous to critique or explain that which the church, priest or imam said was unexplainable.

Before the germ, viral and parasite theory of disease, physicians had no tools to understand disease and its propagation. Priests told people disease was a result of sin, Satan and evil spirits. With the discovery of microbes, scientists gained new tools to understand disease. They could study infection strategies, immunity, epidemiology, and much more. Suddenly the terrible diseases of the past were understandable. The plagues of Europe, yellow fever, small pox, pneumonia, tuberculosis, syphilis, etc., were now removed from the divine and placed squarely in the natural world.

¹ Galileo was put under house arrest for the last year of his life; Darwin's work has been suppressed by many religions since it was first published in 1859; Salman Rushdie has had a death threat over him since writing his novel *Satanic Verses* (Macmillan, 2000) and Theo van Gogh was murdered for producing a short film critical of Islam.

Various philosophers – from Spinoza to Voltaire, Feuerbach to Marx – blazed a path toward understanding religion and its role in society, but it was not until Richard Dawkins' idea of “viruses of the mind”² that we gained a ready-made way to examine religion as closely as we look at the epidemiology of the flu virus. This book will show how religions of all kinds fit in the natural world, how they function in our minds and culture and how similar they are to the germs, parasites and viruses that inhabit our bodies.

This book owes a great deal to Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett,³ but it seeks to go a step further by showing how their revolutionary ideas work in everyday life. The paradigm that they pioneered can explain the fundamentalism of your Uncle Ned, the sexual behavior of a fallen megachurch minister, the child-rearing practices of your Pentecostal neighbor, why 19 men flew planes into the World Trade Center or why women blow themselves up in the crowded markets of Baghdad.

As a member of Western culture, you are affected by religious indoctrination. No matter what your own upbringing is, you live in a religious sea and cannot help but imbibe some of the waters. This book will help you look at areas you may have overlooked in your journey. Religious dogma, habit, beliefs or guilt may affect you in ways you may not recognize.

In recent years I have become alarmed at the role religion increasingly plays in society. Religion seems to inject itself into schools, courts, legislatures, presidential politics and local school boards, detracting from rational conversation about real-world problems like science education, economic development, disaster relief and war.⁴ Outside the United States, the violence and intolerance expressed by fundamentalists and cults throughout the world bring an urgency to the task of understanding religion and its power. Some very scary people are preaching hatred and intolerance. Their words sound similar to the language of ethnic cleansing.

2 Richard Dawkins, *Viruses of the Mind* [essay on-line] (1991, accessed 20 November 2008); available from <http://cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/Dawkins/viruses-of-the-mind.html>; Internet.

3 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press, 1976); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006) and Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Viking Adult, 2006).

4 The religious counterparts to these are the push for in-school alternatives to evolution, creationism, stem cell research opposition, religious leaders declaring various hurricanes god's wrath on certain cities like Orlando or New Orleans and George W. Bush calling the war in Iraq a Crusade.

Here are quotes from some well-known leaders:

I hope I live to see the day when, as in the early days of our country, we won't have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over again and Christians will be running them. What a happy day that will be!

-Jerry Falwell⁵

There will never be world peace until God's house and God's people are given their rightful place of leadership at the top of the world.

-Pat Robertson⁶

The long-term goal of Christians in politics should be to gain exclusive control over the franchise. Those who refuse to submit publicly to the eternal sanctions of God by submitting to His Church's public marks of the covenant – baptism and holy communion – must be denied citizenship, just as they were in ancient Israel.

-Gary North⁷

I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good ... Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a biblical duty, we are called on by God to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism.

-Randall Terry⁸

⁵ Rev Jerry Falwell, *America Can Be Saved* (Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1979), 52-53, from Albert J Menendez and Edd Doerr, *The Great Quotations on Religious Freedom* (Prometheus Books, 2002).

⁶ Pat Robertson, *The New World Order*, New Ed ed. (Thomas Nelson, March 1992).

⁷ Gary North, *Political Polytheism: the Myth of Pluralism* (Institute for Christian Economics, 1989). Darling of Christian Reconstructionists, North predicted catastrophe in an war with the Soviet Union in 1985 and predicted that Y2K would result in global catastrophe. He believes in ultimate Christian rule. He is a member of the Presbyterian Church in America.

⁸ Reported by *The News Sentinel* (Fort Wayne, IN), 16 August 1993. Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue. Terry, a Catholic, after several extramarital affairs, divorced in 2000 and is now remarried with three children. The long list of Terry's transgressions against his own beliefs is remarkable, if not unique, among those who are most bombastic in defense of their religion.

We – with God's help – call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. We also call on Muslim ulema, leaders, youths, and soldiers to launch the raid on Satan's U.S. troops and the devil's supporters allying with them, and to displace those who are behind them so that they may learn a lesson.

-Osama Bin Laden edict⁹

In each of these quotes hate, intolerance, supremacy and exclusivity are central concepts. An important goal of this book is to explain the power of religion to drive this kind of thinking and behavior.

The Australian philosopher John Passmore once said, “*The chains men bear they forged themselves. Strike off their chains and they will weep for their lost security.*” This book is about breaking hidden chains, discovering how religion subtly works in our culture and minds and learning how to live without the chains.

About the Author

I am a psychologist and a student of religion and society. Raised in a fundamentalist Church of Christ environment, I went to a small Quaker college as an undergraduate, later completed a master's degree in religion at a Methodist Seminary and a doctorate in Counseling Psychology at George Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. I was an agnostic by my early 30s and an Atheist by the time I was 40. While my journey informs this work, it is not biographical. It creates a framework through which you will be able to see and analyze religious beliefs and behavior, including your own.

A Note on Terminology

I use the term “non-theist” to refer to you, the reader. I wish to be inclusive of all who might fit this category: agnostics, deists, Atheists, freethinkers, spiritual people, etc. You might even be an Episcopalian, Unitarian, Quaker or non-religious, spiritual person. I refer to those who are highly religious, fundamentalists, superstitious or cult members as religionists. It matters not what you call yourself. I will explore with you the power of religion

⁹ The American Muslim, *Bin Laden's Fatwa: A Call to Harabah* [article on-line] (11 February 2003, accessed 21 November 2008); available from http://www.theamericanmuslim.org/fam.php/features/articles/bin_ladens_fatwa_a_call_to_harabah/; Internet.

on our lives and bring about a new paradigm for understanding religious behavior in our world.

Finally, I will only capitalize the names of specific gods such as Allah, Jehovah, Zeus and Jesus. The word “god” will be lower case unless it is included in a direct quote.

The Structure of the Book

Beginning with a “big picture” we move down to the social, the psychological and finally the personal. Chapters 1 and 2 take a broad view and state the case for religion’s similarities to the biological world. Chapters 3 through 7 explore the social, political and psychological aspects of religion, including such topics as hypnotic techniques of evangelical preachers, the role of sex, guilt, and morality in propagating religion, and personality and intelligence. Chapters 8 through 10 examine religious influence in your life and family. You may find some new tools for understanding your religious history or upbringing. Finally, Chapters 11 and 12 are devoted to science and the future of religion.

CHAPTER 1: RELIGION AS A VIRUS

"We despise all reverences and all objects of reverence which are outside the pale of our list of sacred things and yet, with strange inconsistency, we are shocked when other people despise and defile the things which are holy for us."

-Mark Twain

Overview

In this chapter, we will examine the remarkable parallels between the propagation methods of some biological systems and the strategies of religion.

A Thought Experiment

Imagine this scenario: You have a serious conversation with a deeply Christian friend. Your friend is intelligent, well educated and knowledgeable. You agree to record the session. The topic is Islam. During the session, you discuss that Mohammed was a self-appointed prophet and that he claimed he talked to Allah and angels. He wrote a book that he claimed is infallible, and he flew from Jerusalem to heaven on a horse.

During the conversation, you agree that Mohammed was probably delusional to think he could talk to god. You agree that the Koran was clearly written by Mohammed and not by Allah. It is ludicrous for him to claim that he is the last prophet and that all others are false. Neither you nor your friend can believe that he flew to heaven, let alone on a horse. It all sounds too crazy, and you both agree it is difficult to see how someone could believe such a religion. At the end of the conversation, you say that Muslims did not choose their religion; they were born into it. Anyone who was exposed to both Christianity and Islam would see that Christianity is the true religion.

Over the next few days, you transcribe the recording onto paper. Then you change all references to Mohammed and make them Jesus. Now the document reads something like this:

During the conversation, you both agree that Jesus was probably delusional to think he could talk to Jehovah. The Bible was clearly written by men and not by Jehovah. You both agree it is ludicrous for Jesus to claim that he is the last prophet and that all later ones are false. Neither of you can believe that he rose from the dead, nor flew to heaven. It all sounds too crazy, and it is difficult to see how someone could believe such a religion. At the end of the conversation, you both agree that Christians did not choose their religion; they were born into it. Anyone who was exposed to both Christianity and Islam would see that Islam is the true religion.

Now, tell your friend, “I made a transcript of our conversation about Islam and would like to go over it with you.” As you read it, watch her reaction. How does she respond to each statement? How soon does she get defensive? How quickly does she start making elaborate arguments that have no more factual basis than the first conversation? If you persist in this line of parallel reasoning, how long before she gets angry or breaks off the conversation? Could this conversation damage your friendship?

You can do the same experiment with other prophetic religions. For example, substitute Joseph Smith for Mormonism or Moses for Judaism. This experiment illustrates the god virus at work. It infects the brain and alters critical thinking skills. It leaves the skill intact for other religions but disables critical thinking about one’s own religion. Keep this thought experiment in mind as we explore the virus-like behavior of religion in individuals and in society.

Religious Conversion Syndrome

Have you ever observed somebody go through a religious conversion? The person seems perfectly reasonable to you and has no particular concern for religion. Then a parent, friend or child dies or he gets a serious illness or is involved in a car accident. In just a matter of weeks, he seeks out and finds the answers to all of life’s questions and starts studying and spouting all sorts of doctrine. During such a window of vulnerability, religion can commandeer a person’s brain. In many cases, the person will join some kind of fundamentalist or charismatic group.

An associate of mine recently lost his father to cancer. Before this family trauma, he was a non-religious person. After his father’s death, he got a severe case of religion that changed his personality dramatically. An evening spent over a good meal in a restaurant became an ordeal in Jesus references. There was no way to have a conversation with him on any subject without religion creeping in. It became very tiresome. Soon I stopped seeing him altogether.

Religious visions and conversions have been reported for centuries. They bear remarkable similarities regardless of religion or culture. William James noticed the similarities over a century ago in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). What would make an Islamic conversion look and sound like a Christian one? Why would a Hindu epiphany bear a close resemblance to a native American vision quest?

Neurological science has shown that such experiences can be created with brain stimulation. Thus, simple neurological stimulation can evoke mystical experiences. Native Americans using Peyote, or Dr. Timothy Leary using LSD, demonstrated this long ago. We know that experiences that appear mystical are very likely neurological responses to any number of naturally occurring things in the environment or the brain. The near-death experiences reported by people for centuries and across all cultures have remarkable similarities to those reported in neurological stimulation experiments.

Dr. Olaf Blanks, a neurologist at Ecole Polytechnique in Lausanne, Switzerland, concludes from his research on brain stimulation, "It may be tempting to invoke the supernatural when this body sense goes awry, the true explanation is a very natural one, the brain's attempt to make sense of conflicting information."¹

What has been called "mystical" for centuries can now be reproduced in Dr. Blanks' laboratory with electrical probes of the brain.

Who Are You and What Did You Do With My Friend?

Some people who experience a religious conversion seem to undergo a personality change. They can be quite congenial and easygoing when talking about mundane things, but when they start talking about their "faith," their demeanor changes. Their tone of voice modifies, their smile becomes tense, and they become defensive when questioned about their evidence for belief. It becomes difficult to have a friendly conversation with them. It looks like a scene from the cult movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), where alien pods take over the brains and bodies of people and change them into emotionless automatons.

Once a person has converted to a religion, it is difficult to have a rational conversation about the irrational aspects of his religion. It is as though something invaded the person and took over a part of his personality. You can no longer talk to him directly. Instead, it seems as if communication is channeled through a religious being that lives inside of him. Well-rehearsed answers come out of his mouth. Things like, "It is a mystery and we are not meant to understand it." Or "God expects us to follow his commands

¹ Sandra Blakeslee, "Out-of-Body Experience: Your Brain Is to Blame," *The New York Times*, 3 October 2006 and Shahar Arzy, et al, "Induction of an illusory shadow person," *Nature*, 443 (21 September 2006): 287.

without question.” “Jesus spoke to me and I know he is in my heart.” It is quickly evident that rational analysis of these statements is not permitted.

Religious Infection

Richard Dawkins and others have noted the similarities of religions to parasitic behavioral control of certain animals. For example, Daniel Dennett writes about religion as a parasite in *Breaking the Spell*. I don't intend to replicate their work but to build on the idea of the parasitic nature of religion in a way that gives us guidance on how to live in a religious world.

For the balance of this chapter, we are going on a tour of religion using the metaphor of viruses. I make no claim that this metaphor works in every way, but it has remarkable power to explain much about individual and group religious behavior and gives religious skeptics a framework by which to understand the subtle influences of religion. Those familiar with Richard Dawkins' revolutionary idea of *memes* will quickly see the viral metaphor as another way to talk about a religious meme. I chose to use the “virus” concept instead of “meme” because viruses are well known to most people, and the biology of viruses creates a useful parallel for our discussion. In either case, I owe a great deal to Dr. Dawkins and his pioneering work, especially in his groundbreaking books, *The Selfish Gene* and *The God Delusion*.²

Parasitic Programming

Science fiction is full of examples of aliens taking over the minds and bodies of humans to further their own ends, but where did science fiction get the idea? Fact can be stranger than fiction.³ There are many examples in biology of parasites, pathogens and viruses infecting the brain of a host and controlling the animal's behavior. To understand our model of viral religion, let us first look at some examples in biology:

- Grasshoppers infected with the hairworm (*Spinochordodes tellinii*) are more likely to jump into water where the hairworm

² For a quick and enlightening read on the viral idea, I would encourage you to read Richard Dawkins' essay “Viruses of the Mind” at <http://cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/Dawkins/viruses-of-the-mind.html>; Internet. This notion is foundational for much of what we will examine in this book.

³ See the novel by Robert Heinlein, *The Puppet Masters* (Doubleday, 1951) or the movie by the same title directed by Stuart Orme starring Donald Southerland (1994). Invader parasites take over humans to rule the world. This was perhaps the first of the alien parasite books and it spawned many more.

reproduces. Thus, the parasite makes its host suicidal to further its own reproduction.

- The rabies virus infects very specific neurons in the brain of the mammal host to create aggressive behavior. This induces the host to attack and bite animals it might otherwise avoid or ignore. The virus takes over the brain of the host for its own purposes without regard for the well-being of the host, who usually dies.
- The lancet fluke (*Dicrocoelium*) infects the brain of ants by taking control and driving them to climb to the top of a blade of grass where they can be eaten by a cow. The ingested fluke then lays eggs in the cow gut. Eventually, the eggs exit the cow, and hungry snails eat the dung (and fluke eggs). The fluke enters the snail's digestive gland and gets excreted in sticky slime full of a seething mass of flukes to be drunk by ants as a source of moisture.

In these and many more examples, we see that parasites, viruses and many other pathogens literally take over parts of the brain and “control” the host. They reprogram the organism in the best interest of the parasite, to the detriment of the host.

A particularly interesting example is the parasitic protozoa *Toxoplasma gondii*. This protozoa causes infected rodents to lose their inborn aversion to cat smells. This behavior is beneficial to *toxoplasma*, because it reproduces in cats that have eaten infected mice and rats. Infected cats in turn spread toxoplasma through their droppings. Robert Sapolsky, writing in the March 2003 edition of *Scientific American*, says: “The infected rodents can still distinguish between all other kinds of smells but selectively lose their fear of cat pheromones, making them much easier for the cat to catch.”

Sapolsky goes on to say,

This is akin to someone getting infected with a brain parasite that has no effect whatsoever on the person's thoughts, emotions, SAT scores or television preferences but, to complete its life cycle, generates an irresistible urge to go to the zoo, scale a

fence and try to French-kiss the pissiest-looking polar bear. A parasite-induced fatal attraction...⁴

Taking this well-established strategy in biology, we can apply the viral concept to religion. While the parasite takes over the perceptions of the ant, religion similarly seems to take over the perceptions of those it infects.

Imagine that a religion is a virus⁵ with its own unique mix of properties. Just as the HIV virus is different than a cold virus, both infect and take over the mechanisms of the body in ways that allow them to reproduce. Religions have five useful properties that are present in different degrees, including the ability to

1. Infect people.
2. Create antibodies or defenses against other viruses.
3. Take over certain mental AND physical functions and hide itself within the individual in such a way that it is not detectable by the individual.
4. Use specific methods for spreading the virus.
5. Program the host to replicate the virus.

Every religion is more or less effective in each of these areas. Let us take a closer look at each of these properties.

Infecting People

Virtually all religions rely upon early childhood indoctrination as the prime infection strategy. Other infection strategies include proselytizing, offering help and financial aid with strings attached, providing educational opportunities at religious institutions and many other approaches which we encounter frequently in the media and in daily exposure to religion.

Creating Defenses Against Other Religions

When a religion infects a person (a “host” in biological terms), it immediately begins creating antibodies against competing viruses. For example, newly minted Baptists will get Bible study that is full of verses and justifications for the rightness of their religion and a host of arguments against other

4 An essay by Robert Sapolsky, “Bugs in the Brain,” *Scientific American* (March, 2003): 94.

5 For purposes of our discussion, I will use the term “virus” although parasite might be more appropriate in some cases. I want to avoid the totally negative connotations of the word “parasite.” Most people realize that viruses can be benign, even beneficial, in some cases. That is not the general understanding of a parasite.

interpretations. In the early stages, it is a race to get as many antibodies as possible into the new convert so the host will have defenses against the rest of the world, and especially competing religions. Once a person is infected with Catholicism, he is rarely tempted to become a Muslim. Once a person is infected as a Baptist, she rarely becomes a Buddhist. Generally speaking, when children are infected with a specific god virus, they stay reasonably close to that religion for the rest of their lives. A Baptist may become a Lutheran or Presbyterian, but rarely Catholic, Muslim or pagan.

Religious immunity is a powerful program designed to ensure that the children are protected from outside influence. In a pluralistic society, this is important. The virus cannot control contact with other religions in the environment, so it takes prophylactic measures to keep people blind or unreceptive to other religions. This is especially important for children whose immunity is not yet complete.

Childhood religious infection is so strong that it seems to have the power to create a permanent imprint in most people. Imprinting was first identified by Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen, who won the 1973 Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine.⁶ In their work with birds and other animals, they showed that many animals learn to identify their parents remarkably fast after birth. In a famous experiment with geese, they demonstrated that substituting a parent figure like a human led to imprinting on the substitute. After imprinting was complete with the substitute, they reintroduced the real parent goose. To their surprise, the goslings could not be reprogrammed to follow the true parent; instead, they followed the substitute figure.

This powerful and rapid learning is strong in many animals and appears to be non-reversible most of the time. Perhaps religious infection is similar. Once a person has imprinted to a given religion, he does not easily change religions. The rituals, songs, ceremony, etc., have a way of sticking with some people so that they do not feel complete unless they are in that particular ritual environment.

Taking Over Certain Mental and Physical Functions and Hiding Within the Individual

Even an adult host who is not overtly religious can act as if the virus is alive and well in his brain. Inquire about religious beliefs, and the host will

⁶ Nobelprize.org, *The Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine 1973* [article on-line] (accessed 20 November 2008); available at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/1973/index.html; Internet.

recite many of the doctrines he learned at age 5 or 10. Just as the chicken pox virus continues to live quietly in the body after the disease is gone, the god virus may live quietly in the host until something evokes it.

Stress can activate the chicken pox virus in adults, leading to the condition known as shingles. Similarly, stress tends to activate the god virus in many people. If they have a traumatic experience, they may reactivate their childhood religion. They start attending church, receiving more “antibodies” to help them stay on the straight and narrow. The virus takes over their mental functions, as illustrated by the display of new guilt-based behavior.

The god virus also has the ability to take over physical functions. For example, many religions attempt to take over sexuality, as with celibacy or abstinence vows. We will discuss this in detail in Chapter 5. To a lesser degree, the virus may change eating and dietary functions, requiring fasts or dietary restrictions.

Finally, the god virus has the ability to hide from internal detection. Once infected, the individual cannot detect major contradictions in his beliefs and behavior. Belief systems become self-evident to him, and no amount of logical discourse will move him from his belief. If a Mormon and Catholic were to debate the merits of their respective religions, neither could see his own inconsistencies and logical fallacies, but would see the other’s quite clearly.

Using Specific and Efficient Vehicles to Spread the Virus – The Vector

In biology the organism that spreads disease is called a vector. A mosquito is a vector for malaria, and a tick is a vector for Lyme disease. In malaria, the mosquito bites a person with malaria and ingests the plasmodium parasite. The plasmodium then moves through the mosquito by creating a perforation in the mosquito’s gut and passing to the salivary glands. When the mosquito bites the next person, she (only females bite) injects the plasmodium into the new person.

Vectors are critical in the life cycle of many parasites. The vector may or may not be harmed in the process of transferring the parasite. Bats seem less affected by rabies than raccoons, but both can be vectors. The flea that carries the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria for the infamous bubonic plague will die in its effort to infect the next rat or human. The bacteria literally block the flea’s digestive tract to force it to regurgitate the *Y pestis* bacteria into its victim. It renders the flea incapable of digesting what it eats.

In a similar fashion, god viruses also need vectors: People can be programmed, even reengineered, to be effective carriers of the virus. We call these people priests, ministers, imams, rabbis, popes, televangelists, shamans, apostles, nuns, Bible professors and, to a lesser degree, elders, deacons or Sunday school teachers. The virus may reengineer these vectors significantly. Reengineering may include years of study in a seminary and learning massive amounts of sometimes obscure and far-fetched ideas as well as many tricks for passing the virus along. It may also include training in how to be celibate and **not** pass one's genes along to be less encumbered with reproductive overhead (spouse and children) and, therefore, more efficient as a vector for the virus. Delusion is employed in the sense of priests and nuns believing that they are married to an invisible god or to the church.

Programming the Host to Replicate the Virus

Finally, the god virus must activate a program for replication in any host. Certain behaviors are programmed to ensure that the virus is passed on to others, especially the host's children. These may include guilt-inducing ideas that create a sense of security in rituals. Examples include first communion, baptism, Bar Mitzvah, confirmation, daily prayer or Bible reading and confession.

Religious Immunities

In 1796, Edward Jenner demonstrated that infecting a person with the cow pox virus effectively immunized the person from the dreaded small pox virus. In other words, one virus immunizes against another.

Religions function in a similar manner. An infected Baptist is generally immunized against Catholicism or Islam. The religion creates a series of defenses within a host to prevent him from seriously considering any other religion. For example, a Baptist would rarely think of studying the Koran as diligently as the Bible. Many Catholics would not spend time studying the writings of John Wesley. A Shiite Muslim would not think to study St. Paul. A Sunni Muslim may find Buddhism unfathomable.⁷ The god virus builds a wall so formidable that many people can't conceive of another religion, let alone understand it.

⁷ Evidence is seen in the Taliban destruction of the Buddhas of Bamyán, one of the cultural treasures of the world. In 2001, with the help of Saudi and Pakistani engineers, these giant sixth century statues were blown up.

From an outside observer's view, the behavior of members of the various religions looks and sounds remarkably similar. Listen to the preaching of Osama bin Laden and Pat Robertson, for example. Both say natural disasters are a god's judgment for some evil. Both denigrate the role of women in their respective religions. Both see Satan at work in the world. From a high-level view, all the major religions look and sound alike in many ways. With a few word changes, a Pat Robertson sermon could easily be turned into something bin Laden might preach.

I use examples of well-known religious leaders, but the analyses could be taken from local churches or mosques just as easily. From years of listening to fundamentalist ministers, I can attest to the incredible statements they make from the pulpit with not a whisper of objection from an otherwise intelligent and reasonable congregation.

Both bin Laden and Robertson have fully functioning brains with all the capabilities for logic, reason, study, learning and critical thinking, but the god virus has disabled some of these functions as effectively as *Toxiplasma gondii* disables the rat's fear of cat pheromones. Nothing else needs to be changed! Simply disabling specific critical thinking skills is all that is necessary for the god virus.

Inhibitions and Prohibitions

An important part of viral control may be found in inhibitions and prohibitions, which keep the believer focused on rituals and actions that reinforce the religion on a daily, even hourly basis. These are often seen in sexual prohibitions: no sex before marriage, no sex during menstruation, no homosexuality, etc. Many religions also have food prohibitions and rules: Fish on Friday, no pork, fasting during certain holidays. Each religion takes a different approach, but all share the same objective: Keep the infected focused on their own religion and protect the unit of propagation – the family. Muslims accomplish this by severely prohibiting female freedoms and expanding male power to control the female and the family. Catholics accomplish it by requiring parents to raise their children as Catholic and mandating sex as strictly a procreative activity with all extramarital sex prohibited.

The prohibition is seen most dramatically in the celibacy of Catholic priests and nuns. Here the virus self-propagates by forcing the host to forgo procreation in service of passing the virus along to as many other people

as possible. Just as the rabies virus takes over the brain of the raccoon and reprograms it to bite other animals – even at the cost of its own life – the Catholic virus directs the priest to spend all his discretionary energies propagating the virus. This is genetic suicide for the priest's genes, but gives the Catholic Church a powerful tool for propagation.

Vector Infection Techniques

Religious vectors use sophisticated methods of preparing and opening potential hosts of the religion. Religious vectors learn preaching techniques that emotionally open up the potential host. (We will discuss this in detail in Chapter 7.) Vectors are expensive for the virus to produce, so they are protected and supported, often to an extreme degree as seen in the protection of priests and preachers in the many recent sex abuse scandals.

Vectors can actually be more efficient as vectors when dead. Examples of efficient dead vectors include Jesus, Paul, Ali (son-in-law of Mohammed), V. I. Lenin (founder of the Soviet Union), Che Guevara (Latin American revolutionary) and Joseph Smith (founder of Mormonism). In the case of Joseph Smith, his death was a fortunate event for the whole movement. His usefulness to the virus had probably run its course, and he was less and less successful as a leader. But once dead, he became a martyr around whom the charismatic and brilliant leader Brigham Young could rally the faithful and establish Paradise in Utah.

Charity Only for the Virus

The god virus programs the host in very specific ways. All god viruses program charity into its followers, but it is a carefully defined charity. I learned this the hard way one Christmas when I was 19 years old. I was a

poor college student who paid my own tuition at a private university and worked hard for every dollar I earned. My mom and dad were proud when I budgeted 20 hard-earned dollars for charity that Christmas. I didn't mention what charity I had chosen, but they assumed it was our church or some church-related charity. Weeks after Christmas my mom

"Ministers say that they teach charity. That is natural. They live on alms. All beggars teach that others should give."

-Robert Ingersoll, 1833-1899

was dying of curiosity and finally asked, “Where did you give your \$20?” I told her I gave it to the ACLU defense fund for draft resisters.

I quickly learned that the ACLU is not a charity, and that god would not count that gift. I learned that you always give to the church or a religious charity or it didn’t count. Until then, I didn’t realize that there was an accounting department in heaven. From reading the Bible, I thought I had learned that you weren’t supposed to advertise your giving like the Pharisees (Matthew 6:1-4).⁸ I figured any giving I did was between god and me. If god didn’t like it, he would let me know. I was feeling pretty good about my choice until then.

Charity and giving are clearly defined by the god virus. Since the survival of the virus depends on regular feeding, it does little good for the virus if you give resources to a non-viral entity, which is therefore not acceptable.

Infected individuals are also programmed to feel guilt if they do not give, or if they give to a charity that does not support the god virus. Catholics generally don’t give to the Baptist college fund. Baptists don’t give to Catholic Charities. No Nazarene gives to the mosque-building fund. No Islamic philanthropist writes a fat check to Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University. In short, if you and your money are not in service to the virus, it doesn’t count and may even count against you

A Good Vector Is Hard to Find

When I was growing up, in the course of 10 years, three ministers in our church were caught having sexual affairs with members. In two other churches of our denomination, five other ministers were caught in affairs, all within one tiny denomination in the Bible belt city of Wichita, Kansas.

It is especially interesting when vectors engage in prohibited behavior since they probably have the highest dose of the virus. Even more interesting are the excuses others make for that behavior. All too often, the behavior is excused with “he just made a mistake” or “he is only human.” When the senior minister of my church was caught in an affair, he was allowed to keep his position! He repeated the “mistake” three times over a 10-year period before he was finally fired. I have seen this occur many times within churches.

⁸ “...that your alms be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (Matthew 6:4).

Why were these folks allowed to stay? Because good vectors are hard to find and expensive to develop. As long as a vector can efficiently feed the virus with money and hosts, the vector will generally remain. Scandal is a small price to pay for a highly effective vector.

Catholic priests are among the most expensive of all vectors. When the Catholic Church learns that a priest is sexually misbehaving, molesting children, having affairs with women or other men, the investment is threatened. That is largely why the church protects the priest-vector rather than the parishioners. It is easier to deal with parishioners than to find and develop a new vector.

The Catholic problem with pedophile priests is a major case in point. I would venture to guess that the Protestant religions have an equally large problem of clergy sexual violations. But because Protestants are more decentralized than the Catholic Church, violations are more easily hidden or violators transferred to another church.

Mutating Religions

Just as in biological systems, religions mutate frequently. Mutations occur constantly, but most never develop into new religions. The Baptists deal with mutations by simply letting the mutation form a new Baptist movement. It is an easy way to keep the main DNA of the movement close without losing it altogether.

Catholics deal with mutations by eliminating them. The Catholic strategy is to keep the DNA as pure as possible and minimize mutations. Thus, threat of excommunication is a primary method of cleansing, and burning at the stake was once popular.⁹ The strategies of both Baptists and Catholics work reasonably well.

In biology, occasionally, mutations are so powerful they overwhelm

9 While many in the United States are familiar with the Salem Witch trials of 1692, there was a much bigger witch and heresy hunt going on in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Historians estimate that 200,000 people were burned at the stake for various heresies during this time. Mary Tudor (Bloody Mary in England) was responsible for 274 executions by burning over her five-year reign, including the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1556. Burning was particularly favored by the Spanish Inquisition because it did not involve shedding the victim's blood, which was disallowed under the prevailing Roman Catholic doctrine, and because it ensured that the condemned had no body to take into the next life (which was believed to be a very severe punishment in itself). It was also thought at that time that burning cleansed the soul, which was considered important for those convicted of witchcraft and heresy. Capital Punishment U.K., *Burning at the Stake* (accessed 20 November 2008); available from <http://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/burning.html>; Internet.

even the strongest defenses and infect entirely new populations. This can happen when the virus encounters a susceptible population. The same goes for religion – in the 1500s, Martin Luther’s god virus swept through the largely uneducated and ignorant populations of northern Germany.

Luther’s god virus was so powerful that it swept through the European population far faster than the original Catholic virus had done a thousand years before. Once let loose, the Protestant virus mutated rapidly. The Calvinist virus was a direct mutation from the Lutheran. The Anabaptist movement blossomed (Mennonites, Hutterites, Church of the Brethren) along with the French Huguenots, Quakers, German Baptists and many more.

A population that is isolated from other religions and largely uneducated is susceptible to the right kind of mutation or a totally new god virus. Buddhism, a mutation of Hinduism, swept through India from 480 BCE to 180 BCE and became the largest god virus in the world at the time. Islam accomplished a similar feat in the Middle East in only 200 years, from 600-800 CE.

Revive Us Again

If you are familiar with fundamentalist church services, you probably know that old hymn, “Revive Us Again.” It is a clear call by the infected that they need a booster shot. Revivals are largely aimed at those who already have the virus. When I was a kid, our church had a revival every year. A guest preacher would preach rejuvenation and recommitment. Most of the people who “got saved” were already related to the church in some way. Rarely did someone come off the streets and get saved.

The revival phenomenon is an adaptive method for keeping the local beliefs strong and preventing outside forces from invading or getting a foothold. It could be seen as mutation prevention. It helps keep people on the straight and narrow. My years growing up in a fundamentalist tradition gave me many opportunities to witness revivalism at work. The focus is much more emotional than the regular church services. A charismatic guest preacher generally leads the revival. The best preachers create an emotional high in the congregation that results in more dedication to the god virus and more money to the church. While sacrifice and giving are most often the themes of a revival, the preacher also spends a lot of time preaching against various “temptations” in the world and against the latest things that might

lead the flock astray, like popular television shows, movies or books. One could see the whole exercise as a “keeping the virus pure” process.

Other religious groups have their own methods of viral purification. Catholics tend to use retreats and marriage renewal as well as a tight bureaucracy that keeps close track of the flock. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have well-organized hierarchies that keep all in line while sanctioning or expelling those who go astray.

Freethinkers, A Mutation out of Control

Sometimes a mutation can get out of control. The Protestant emphasis on reading the Bible allowed people to draw their own conclusions without priestly interpretation or central ecclesiastical control. As a result, dozens of mutations sprang up in Europe after Lutheranism began. When people were able to read for themselves, inevitably some of them concluded that the whole enterprise was a house of cards. Most kept their mouths shut to avoid losing their heads, but others made the leap to openly criticize religion and its role in society. These early critics of religion were the forebears of today's freethinkers and the freethinking movement.¹⁰

Freethinkers are interested in examining the world without the blinders of religious infection. They generally are non-religious or less religious. Some are spiritual or hold to some kind of spirituality. In many ways, freethinkers have reduced or eliminated their god virus infection.

Summary

Biological virus strategies bear a remarkable resemblance to methods of religious propagation. Religious conversion seems to affect personality. In the viral paradigm, the god virus infects and takes over the critical thinking capacity of the individual with respect to his or her own religion, much as rabies affects specific parts of the central nervous system. A simple thought experiment reveals how the god virus works to dull critical thinking. The god virus infects an individual and then inoculates against other viruses. Vectors in biology carry a parasite, virus or pathogen from one reservoir to another. Religious vectors act in similar ways. Priests, imams, ministers, etc.,

¹⁰ Giordano Bruno is often cited as one of the earliest proponents of freethinking. He lived from 1548 until he was burned at the stake by the Inquisition in 1600. Over the centuries, he was followed by many who questioned the suppositions of religion at their peril, including Galileo, Voltaire, Molyneux and Diderot.

carry the virus and infect new people. The virus carefully directs resources toward it and creates taboos against giving to competing viruses. Sometimes vectors fail. The expense of developing a vector makes it imperative to protect it even in failure as in the case of priest pedophilia. Mutations are constantly produced. Occasionally one breaks out, as in the case of Martin Luther, to infect vulnerable people and cultures.

CHAPTER 2: HOW RELIGIONS SURVIVE AND DOMINATE

"The word god is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honourable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation no matter how subtle can (for me) change this. For me the Jewish religion like all others is an incarnation of the most childish superstitions."

-Albert Einstein, letter to Gutkind, Jan. 3, 1954

Overview

In this chapter we will build a historical foundation for understanding religion in society. We will examine strategies religions use to propagate and perpetuate themselves. We will also look at parasitic and symbiotic propagation and compare some non-theistic religions to more traditional ones.

Survival Strategies

A religion always functions to ensure its own survival. While it may espouse various ideas about brotherhood, love and community, these are always secondary to religious survival. No religion dissolves itself because another religion is suddenly seen as “more true.” The Baptists don’t close their doors because they realize the Mormons are the true church. Muslims don’t convert the mosque to a cathedral in recognition of Jesus as the true messiah. Religions simply do not give up. They modify and mutate. They do whatever it takes to keep the virus alive and viable in a changing environment.

In some cases, individuals are sacrificed in the service of the survival of a religion. This is exemplified by the extreme case of suicide bombers in the Middle East. Suicide in the service of the virus is also seen in the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka and in the Japanese Kamikaze in WWII. The host is deeply indoctrinated to believe there will be an individual reward in the next life for the ultimate sacrifice on earth and, therefore, complies.

Self-sacrifice also occurs in the celibacy of priests and nuns who commit genetic suicide to be efficient vectors of the Catholic virus. While this is a less violent approach, it serves the same function for the virus. The respective societies support both types of vectors. The suicide bombers' families often receive support and payments, and the non-procreating priests and nuns receive support from the church as they go about the business of infecting new hosts.

In both of these cases, the behavior of individuals is controlled by the virus in the service of survival. Just as surely as the *Toxoplasma gondii* takes over control of the rat brain, the god virus takes control of the suicide bomber, priest, preacher or nun and directs behavior to ensure survival or advancement of the religion.

Stamping out Heresy

A religion must protect itself from internal mutations and external threats. To accomplish this, it creates antibodies for every known competing

god virus on the outside and possible mutations on the inside. Heresy is an internal mutation that threatens to weaken the religion from within by splitting off large groups. The Gnostic, Arian and Nestorian Christian heresies of the second and third centuries were major challenges to Catholicism.¹ The Catholic response was to create a written creed – the Apostle’s Creed against Gnosticism (early 2nd century) and later the Nicene Creed against Arianism and other heresies (325 CE). The creeds were designed as an antibody to weed out those who adhered to heresy, to excommunicate and, if political powers were available, execute them. Just as your body uses antibodies to identify and kill foreign invaders, a religious creed can be administered to determine if someone is a heretic and eliminate them.

In 381 CE the emperor Theodosius published an edict that all his subjects should profess the faith of the bishops of Rome and Alexandria (i.e., take the Nicene creed) or be handed over for punishment. Even though large numbers of bishops opposed the Nicene Creed at the time, Catholicism was able to use the political structure to gain supremacy over these growing heresies. Many people were excommunicated or otherwise isolated – or even executed – in the effort to purify and control the flock.

A great deal of religious literature is a response to heresy. Most religions claim their literature was handed down by a god, but the god seems to be very concerned with all the heresies of the particular day and time when the scriptures were written. Reading the religious literature of any period in history is a study in the religious protection strategy of the day. Much of the

“When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called religion.”

-Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

¹ Arianism is most commonly used to refer to the theological positions made famous by the theologian Arius (c. 250–336 CE), who lived and taught in Alexandria, Egypt, in the early fourth century. The most controversial of Arius’ teachings dealt with the relationship between God the Father and the person of Jesus and conflicted with trinitarian christological positions. For a time, Arianism rivaled all other forms of Christianity in popularity, especially in the east. Nestorianism is the doctrine that Jesus exists as two persons, the man Jesus and the divine Son of God, or Logos, rather than as a unified person. This doctrine is identified with Nestorius (c. 386–451 CE), Patriarch of Constantinople. This view of Christ was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and the conflict over this view led to the Nestorian schism, separating the Assyrian Church of the East from the Byzantine Church.

literature, after a canon² has been established, is concerned with the heresies that crop up. Paul and others showed great concern for heresy which shows how common heresy was even in the earliest church.

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

-NSV Galatians 1:6-7

But false prophets arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.

-NSV 2 Peter 2:1

By 180 CE, Irenaeus of Lyons had written five books against several different heresies. Many more books were to follow over the next three centuries. The Catholic god virus had many mutations to stamp out.

Threats From External Viruses

Any god virus is susceptible to new, radically different viruses. Persian Zoroastrianism and Hinduism were not prepared for the highly parasitic Islam that swept out of the Arabian desert in the eighth and ninth centuries CE. The result was rapid Islamic conquest and conversion of large populations. Rulers like Xerxes and Alexander the Great had conquered many of these same communities in earlier centuries, but they generally left the local religion intact. The new Muslim virus was so powerful that it easily swept local gods and even ancient religions like Zoroastrianism and Hinduism aside.

Stemming the Tide With Fundamentalism

As a virus spreads, its growth eventually slows, which gives time for other god viruses to create antibodies against it. For example, the Islamic

² A canon is the accepted and authorized religious literature of a given religion. The canon of Christianity was officially established in 393 at the Synod of Hippo under the authority of St. Augustine but for practical purposes was probably well established a hundred years earlier. The Mormon canon was completed with the death of Joseph Smith. The Jewish canon was probably established by 200 BCE, and the Islamic Canon was established within 100 years of Mohammed's death.

tide was eventually stemmed in India with Hindu antibodies that gave rise to Hindu fundamentalism. Indeed, fundamentalism in most of its forms is the active creation of antibodies to some threatening virus. As long as threatening religions or mutations are present, fundamentalism will churn out antibodies to keep the population under control and prevent mutations from getting out of hand.

Fundamentalism Defined

Fundamentalism is a set of prescribed thinking patterns and behaviors based on strict and legalistic interpretations of holy texts. In viral terms, it means that people are so deeply infected that they are immune to influence and generally ignore any evidence that contradicts their beliefs. Fundamentalism is exclusive in nature; individuals and groups see themselves as the only true believers or at least more righteous and accurate in behavior and beliefs. Fundamentalism is often parasitic in seeking to impose its beliefs through means of force, coercion, ostracism or political power, even at the expense of lost or ruined individual lives.

“Protestantism was the triumph of Paul over Peter, fundamentalism is the triumph of Paul over Christ.”

-Will Durant

In some cases, a religion undergoes a permanent fundamentalist mutation. The Jesuits were such an adaptation for the Catholics. Faced with the heresies of Martin Luther and others, the Jesuit Order (Society of Jesus, est. 1540) quickly learned how to create strong antibodies through its sophisticated religious education and indoctrination of youth.³ Their members have been called Soldiers of Christ and Foot Soldiers of the Pope since their founding. Through their efforts, the Protestants were stopped in Poland and Southern Germany.

The Inquisition was another such institution, also known as Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition.⁴ For centuries, its purpose has been to root out heresy, confront and eliminate it.

³ As illustrated by the famous quote by the Jesuit Francis Xavier, “Give me the children until they are seven and anyone may have them afterwards.”

⁴ In 1908 the name was changed to “The Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office” and changed again in 1965 to “Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,” an office once headed by the current pope, Benedict XVI.

How Minor Religions Survive

When a religion is clearly at a disadvantage, it often mutates into a form that is not threatening to the dominant religion. Just as a foreign virus in your body may cause a strong immune response, a foreign religion can evoke a strong fundamentalist response that can be fatal to the weaker religion. By mutating into something that is benign or perceived as non-threatening, the weaker religions may be able to survive. Judaism survived in Europe for centuries through such an adaptation. Since the Catholic Church prohibited usury or the collection of interest, the Jewish community provided this service to Christians. Mormonism stepped back from its virulent form in most parts of the United States after experiencing a series of strong, even violent reactions from other religions in New York, Illinois and Missouri. After most retreated to Utah, the Mormon groups that stayed behind became much less vociferous and violent.

No matter how benign a minor religion may seem, the potential for violence against the weaker religion is always present. The pogroms throughout the Middle Ages against the Jews, the Inquisition and expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, to the Holocaust, to the current threat to the Jews in the Middle East, are continuing examples of this phenomenon. Another example is the genocidal persecution of the French Huguenots, including the famous St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572 where 110,000 Huguenots were murdered. The persecution by the king and the Catholic Church continued for over 30 years despite edicts of tolerance and appeals to peaceful coexistence from both sides.

Viral Balance: Religion and Power

In a biological system, organisms may exist that are somewhat beneficial to their host in cooperation with other biota but become pathogenic when not balanced or held in check. In adults, taking antibiotics can seriously disrupt the biotic balance in the gut, giving opportunity for fungus and pathogenic bacteria to take hold. The same is true of the vagina where biotic balance keeps many pathogens at bay. Writing about this balance, Adrianus Nicolaas of the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, says this:

The intestinal tract harbors a dynamic, complex bacterial ecosystem. The presence and composition of gut flora is known to be of great importance for resistance to pathogenic microbes (e.g. via competition for space and nutritional elements). The

composition of the gut flora influences the development of the mucosal immune system....⁵

In other words, a well-balanced gut contributes to a strong immune system. If one or more gut microbes gets out of control, it can contribute to damage and disease.

Religions can also keep one another in check. In a pluralistic society, religions have difficulty usurping political power and legislating their beliefs. In the United States, the Mormon virus had total control of the political apparatus in Utah until around 1890, to such a degree that non-Mormons were murdered and driven out of this Mormon enclave. The Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857 is one of the most famous examples, but is not unique in Mormon history.⁶ The current level of Mormon control can be seen by simply driving through any part of Utah. Beside almost every Mormon Church stands a public school. Local school boards, controlled by Mormons, try to place schools close to the church so that the children can leave school for an hour each day to receive religious instruction. Clearly, the state is in the service of the virus with respect to education.

"It is a truism that almost any sect, cult, or religion will legislate its creed into law if it acquires the political power to do so."

-Sir Arthur C. Clark

In less pluralistic societies one religion may dominate. Some Islamic countries, for example, have strong control over the political power systems. Islam has been extremely effective because it is one of the first religions to successfully combine religious and political controls. Indeed, it is constitu-

⁵ World Intellectual Property Organization, *Modulation of a Balance Between the Gut Mucosal Immune System and the Intestinal Microflora* [article on-line] (2002, accessed 20 November 2008); available from <http://www.wipo.int/pctdb/en/wo.jsp?wo=2002072142>; Internet.

⁶ In 1857, one hundred twenty non-Mormons were crossing Mormon territory on their way to California. Fifty Mormons taking orders from local ecclesiastical leaders went out and under a white flag of truce tricked the travelers into giving up their arms. They then massacred all but 17 children under the age of six. Brigham Young himself had stated only a few months earlier, "If any miserable scoundrels come here, cut their throats." He never accepted any responsibility for the massacre but played a big part in an attempted cover up by blaming it on local Native Americans. Only in 1998 did the Mormon Church accept any responsibility and placed a monument at the site. Richard Abanes, *One Nation Under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows Press, 2003), 245-51. Also see ReligiousTolerance.org, *The 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre* [article on-line] (accessed 20 November 2008); available from http://www.religioustolerance.org/lds_mass.htm; Internet.

tionally incapable of separating religion and politics. From Mohammed's initial conquests, his was a political religion. The notion of separation of church and state is inconceivable. The Islamic virus was well crafted by its founders to defend against all other god viruses. Islam may well be the best-defended god virus of the major religions.

Its excellent defenses come from the fact that Mohammed was exposed to a wide range of god viruses in his formative period. While somewhat isolated on the Arabian Peninsula, the nascent Islamic religion was close to the center of trade of goods and ideas between east and west. Most of the Islamic antibodies were designed before Islam was a hundred years old. They were effective against every religion they encountered. Islam's strong defenses were written into the Koran and subsequent writings and were based on what was learned from the Jewish, Christian and polytheists of Arabia and, somewhat later, the Zoroastrians of Persia.

Both Judaism and Islam began as political/military movements. Their roots from Moses and Mohammed were militaristic and political. Christianity was born as a non-militaristic religion under the domination of the Roman Empire. Only later did it form its militaristic face. Christianity inherited strong defenses from Judaism. St. Paul invented others, but they were designed to survive as a minority religion in a large and powerful empire. Its antibodies were more focused on the ability to survive in a hostile religious and political environment. Indeed, the writings of Paul are some of the best defenses ever developed for Christianity, focusing on fighting other god viruses and surviving in hostile territory rather than on infecting a political nervous system.

From early on, Christian writers created justifications for taking over political structures but were held in check or slowed down for three centuries by competing religious and political systems. Ultimately, they succeeded, but the initial weakness of Christianity gave it less expertise in the political arena than Islam and much less experience or justification for military methods of infection. As a result, its writings are rather poor guidance on how to infect the instruments of state. On the other hand, from the beginning, Islam's writings were well-designed guides. Paul, Jesus and Moses gave Mohammed great material on which to build.

The Christian virus depends heavily upon the Jewish virus for guidance. Christian preachers refer incessantly to Old Testament political schemas because there are none in the New Testament. The prophets, patriarchs

and rulers of ancient Israel like Isaiah, Jeremiah, David, Solomon and Moses all saw the religion as inseparable from the political. To this day, this is the struggle of a secular Israel, where the Jewish religion is constantly putting pressure on the state to infect the political central nervous system. Because Israel's very existence depends on support and protection from the pluralistic Western world, it cannot afford to let Jewish fundamentalism take over. Nevertheless, there are many Jewish groups in Parliament with exactly that agenda.

Advanced God Viruses

Islam has some of the best defenses against other god viruses and has the potential to be more parasitically aggressive when consolidating political power with a society. More recent religions have had the misfortune of coming into a religious biota that was already crowded and somewhat balanced. For example, Mormonism began in an already crowded viral environment, and while its novelty and new defenses created an astounding opportunity for growth, it was nothing like the spread of Islam. Yet, Mormonism from its inception was designed to infect the political nervous system – Joseph Smith even ran for president in 1844. At each stage Mormons sought to take control of local political structure from its founding in New York state, to the move to Nauvoo, Illinois, then to Northwestern Missouri. However, because there were other strong religions present, they were not able to succeed until they migrated to the religious vacuum of Utah.

Islam developed in a fragmented society where polytheistic viruses were weak, Judaism was not parasitic, and Christian sects were fragmented. The Islamic virus was so well designed that Islam even avoided direct confrontation with other “people of the book.”⁷ As a result, Jews and many Christian communities were simply bypassed as long as they did not politically or militarily resist Islam. This allowed Islam to spread without

“Religion does three things quite effectively: divides people, controls people, deludes people.”

-Carlespie Mary Alice McKinney

⁷ Mohammed held Jews and Christians above other religions because they followed the Bible. While he felt they believed their religions were corrupted, he still respected them and showed tolerance whereas he had none for other religions.

expending energy fighting well-established and older monotheistic or quasi-monotheistic religions.

Islam attacked Christianity as a false monotheistic religion. With its Holy Trinity – which makes it look suspiciously like a three-god religion – Mohammed claimed that Christianity was a corruption of Allah’s word and was not truly monotheistic. Islam’s clear monotheism gave it an advantage in converting even many Christians. Islam’s creed, “There is no god but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet,” is a powerful argument against the confusing and conflicting theories about the Trinity.

So as not to oversimplify, we should acknowledge that Islam had its own mutations that threatened it from within – Shii’a and Sunni being the most prominent split. Nevertheless, Islam had sufficient power to overcome other religions in its expanding domain and continues to grow today with remarkable efficiency.

Scientology is another advanced virus, but it too has had the misfortune of coming into an already crowded religious biota. Had Scientology or Mormonism been born in a less crowded or virally weakened environment, either might have swept the globe.

Fundamentalism – the Virulent Form of God Virus

Biological viruses walk a fine line between being too lethal and too weak. A highly virulent virus like the Ebola may kill its host so quickly that it has no chance to infect another host. Conversely, a weakened virus, like the smallpox vaccine, may be so compromised that it cannot reproduce.

God viruses face the same problem. Fundamentalism is the more virulent form of a religion. It generally must be kept in check lest it damage, cripple, divide or even kill its host society. Fundamentalism is most commonly “let loose” when the god virus is under attack or is in expansion mode. Thus, it can defend a religion from dangerous attackers, or it can create the energy to expand and defeat other religions. Fundamentalism can also turn on its own religion and cause havoc. The Iranian Revolution of 1978 was brought about by fundamentalists in Shii’a Islam to overthrow the Shah of Iran. Once this was accomplished, it continued to feed on the society and the lives of those who opposed it.

When fundamentalism gains ascendancy, rigid behavior is enforced and deviation receives quick sanction. Iran finally got the fundamentalist

genie back in the bottle in the early 1990s, but it continues to flare out of control on occasion.

Fundamentalism can be seen as an inflammation. Human immune systems use inflammation as a tool for fighting infection. Unfortunately, inflammation can continue in some cases long after the threat has subsided. Unchecked inflammation can cause hay fever, atherosclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis in the human body. Religious fundamentalism may protect the parent religion for a time, but it can continue long after its usefulness has passed, causing collateral damage to institutions, families and the social fabric.

A society cannot survive for long with rampant fundamentalism. It must be brought back under control once the emergency has passed or the expansion is complete. Uncontrolled, fundamentalism feeds on society itself. Examples of this can be seen in the rigid and deadly rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal. Similarly, China's experience with communist fundamentalism in the so-called Cultural Revolution probably led to the deaths of 30 million peasants or more. Many were denounced and taken to reeducation camps or executed for failing to follow the fundamentalist beliefs of the party.

Saudi Arabia has harbored a strongly fundamentalist virus since 1744 when the dynasty of bin Saud formed an alliance with the cleric Abd-al-Wahhab to establish the desert kingdom. Wahibism began as a very conservative reform movement in reaction to certain corruptions that were creeping into Sunni Islam in the 18th century. It was established to purify Sunni Islam and drive out practices like veneration of popular saints, tomb visitation and idolatry. Abd-al-Wahhab perceived a moral decline in Islam and sought to establish strict behavior standards for believers. Wahibism has been carefully followed and kept under control by the ruling class for two centuries.

"You are never dedicated to do something you have complete confidence in. No one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. They know it's going to rise tomorrow. When people are fanatically dedicated to political or religious faiths or any other kind of dogmas or goals, it's always because these dogmas or goals are in doubt."

-Robert M. Pirsig

A compromise of sorts was struck decades ago that let this virulent virus focus its energy outside Saudi Arabia, as long as it did not challenge the ruling elite inside. Thus, Saudi authorities have been hesitant to confront the virus directly because the political central nervous system is itself highly infected. For example, Osama bin Laden was a close follower of Wahibism and from a prominent Saudi family.

Al Qaeda is even more fundamentalist than Wahibism but is a direct mutation from Wahibism. As long as Wahibism and Al Qaeda kept their focus on Afghanistan or other places, it was tolerated. But Al Qaeda has become a direct threat to the Saudi ruling class, which now faces the delicate task of weeding out Al Qaeda without fanning the flames of Wahibism.

By supporting Wahibism and its missionary efforts in other countries, the fundamentalist virus infected the weakened societies of post-communist Afghanistan and Pakistan. It has now become endemic to these areas.

Reservoirs of God Viruses

In nature, there are places where a virus can hide or stay for long periods and then break out in an epidemic. Bats are a reservoir for rabies virus, for example. From the bat reservoir, rabies can break out into other animals. The bacteria associated with the plague of the Middle Ages, *Y pestis*, is believed to have started from a reservoir of rats in east central Africa. From time to time the plague seemed to come out of that area and work its way north into the Middle East and Europe.⁸ Somewhere in West Africa, the Ebola virus stays hidden and occasionally breaks out, generally through apes into human populations.

In biology, it is often unclear why a specific pathogen breaks out into the general population. Why do we get one type of flu one year and a different one another year? It appears to be related to the wide number of flu viruses in many different reservoirs. Each virus is held in check due to isolation, lack of efficient vectors or general immunity to the specific strain.

A virus can stay quiescent for years, during which time it may mutate and change many times until one variant finds the key to breaking out. Thus, the outbreaks of plague during the Middle Ages may have been a

⁸ Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural & Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (The Free Press 1983).

succession of mutated pathogens from an East African reservoir. Each was different enough to overwhelm the defenses of those in its path.

Religious Viral Reservoirs

God viruses also have reservoirs. Afghanistan was the reservoir for two fundamentalist variants, the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The Taliban was a local variant of strict Islam that began as a reaction to perceived corruption in Afghan society. Al Qaeda, as noted earlier, was an offshoot of Wahibism in Saudi Arabia. Both sought to impose Shari'a law on society, which severely restricted women's rights and sought to eliminate western influence by outlawing television, photography, kite-flying, chess and other things.

While the two movements had different origins, they were both fundamentalist responses to perceived corruption and sought to purify the society and believers. After growing and developing inside the Afghanistan reservoir, these highly parasitic and aggressive viruses broke out in the 1990s to infect a wide geographic area. Once out of the reservoir, they had the power to gain a foothold in many countries by infecting young and even well-educated Muslims. Al Qaeda is particularly effective at infecting younger people. For example, it is rare for an Al Qaeda suicide bomber to be over 30 years old.

In centuries past, god viruses spread much like biological ones, following trade routes and armies. Today, religion can spread via the Internet and other forms of high-speed global communication. With this new electronic nervous system, fundamentalism can crop up anywhere and at unprecedented rates. It no longer needs traditional trade routes or conquering armies. Global infections can happen from remote reservoirs that are untouchable by western or any other armies.

Forms of Islamic fundamentalism have spread widely from England to Indonesia. The immune system for this type of infection has not yet been developed, and as a result, governments and other religious groups are struggling to contain it. Military response is not likely to succeed and has probably strengthened the Islamic fundamentalists. Interestingly, the development of Islamic fundamentalism has provoked Christian fundamentalism, which is now seen in strong measure throughout the U.S. military – discussed more in the next chapter. When President Bush referred to “a crusade” to combat Islamic terrorism, it resonated positively with many Christian fundamental-

ists and negatively with many Islamic fundamentalists. The two viruses can and do feed off one another.

In the United States, reservoirs of particularly parasitic viruses reside in places like Jerry Falwell's Liberty University or Pat Robertson's Regent University. For the greater part of the last 50 years, Southern Baptists seem to be the largest reservoir of fundamentalism, although it exists among Pentecostals and Nazarenes as well.

While these seem to be the obvious reservoirs, it is difficult to predict which reservoir will produce the most effective god virus. Who would have guessed in 1820 that Joseph Smith, a talented, charismatic fabricator of fantastic tales, would spawn the highly infectious Mormon virus? Who would have predicted that a small movement started in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517 by Martin Luther would upend the twelve-hundred-year-old Catholic monopoly in Europe?

When the dominant religion is weak, as Catholicism was in 1517, new religions have a chance to break out. Many new mutations tried to break out in the century before Luther but were not strong enough or did not have a leader politically powerful enough to succeed. For example, John Huss created a competing virus around 1400 and founded the Moravian movement. This movement simmered for over a hundred years and had a strong influence on Martin Luther, but it never broke out into the mainstream.⁹ To illustrate, when Luther visited the parishes of Saxony to determine the state of religious education he wrote in the preface to his book *The Small Catechism* (1528): "Mercy! Good God! what manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine, and, alas! many pastors are altogether incapable and incompetent to teach."¹⁰ The entire countryside was ripe for the picking. His new virus easily swept much of Northern Germany.

Marxism is another powerful god virus that smoldered for years in many small pockets of Europe and eventually broke out in Russia in 1917, because of the weakness of the Russian political structure and Orthodox Church.

9 John Huss (c. 1369-1415). Advocated the elimination of indulgences, use of the local language, and independence from Rome and pacifism. His teachings were declared heretical in 1411; he was burned at the stake in 1415. His followers went underground but maintained the movement until it was formally organized in 1457.

10 Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* [book preface on-line] (accessed 20 November 2008); available from <http://www.bookofconcord.com/smallcatechism.html#preface>; Internet.

Its tenets are as faith-based as any pronouncement by Jesus or Jerry Falwell. Marxism has no more empirical evidence for its validity than Mormonism. The Marxist historical imperative was as close to a faith statement as the doctrine of the Trinity. Marxism had a particularly effective vector in Vladimir Lenin. As in many cases, once the virus was well on its way to dominance, its principal vector, Lenin, was more valuable dead than alive. Stalin, familiar with the methods of religious manipulation from his own seminary training, built the cult of Lenin after his death. The peasant culture, deprived of its traditional religious outlet in Orthodox Christianity, flocked to see the entombed Lenin. Lenin became the deity of Marxism and was displayed for all to see. No Pharaoh or Caesar was more deified after his death.

"Faith is believing what you know ain't so."
-Mark Twain

Fundamentalism Versus Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism always has a reservoir quietly hidden and capable of erupting. If it not held in check by the dominant virus or other viruses, it can take over a society, with the worst of consequences.

As observers of fundamentalism, we can see these developments and help educate people about what may be happening. We can point out that when two competing fundamentalist viruses collide, rational discussion disappears. Fundamentalism is incapable of compromise. Fundamentalist movements believe that theirs is the only way and that all others are corrupt and doomed. With such deep infection, productive dialogue is unlikely. Further, the presence of fundamentalism evokes fundamentalist responses from others. Mormonism evoked strong responses in Illinois and Missouri in the 1830-1850s. A similar response happened during the Crusades of the 11th to 13th centuries, where Catholic fundamentalism evoked an Islamic fundamentalist response leading to the conquest and reconquest of the Holy Land by each. This went back and forth until the Catholic side exhausted itself and withdrew altogether from Palestine.

Today we see Islamic and Christian fundamentalism vilifying one another from their respective pulpits. It is probably no coincidence that there has been a huge increase in fundamentalist activity in the U.S. military

even as the military is in the Islamic world to battle Islamic fundamentalists. Fundamentalist groups like Christian Embassy have infiltrated the very top of the U.S. military and gained positions of influence in the Pentagon. From the U.S. Air Force Academy evangelical scandal, to Campus Crusade for Christ attempting to send thousands of conversion packets to soldiers in

“Fundamentalism isn’t about religion, it’s about power.”

-Salman Rushdie

Iraq, evangelicals have worked hard to use the military for religious purposes. Scott Blom of Campus Crusade for Christ says in a promotional video: “Our purpose for Campus Crusade for Christ at the Air Force Academy is to make Jesus Christ the issue at the Air Force Academy and

around the world. They’re government paid missionaries when they leave here.”¹¹

Fundamentalism always seeks to infect the institutions that make its propagation easiest. Whether the U.S. military or Islamists in the Pakistani army, the purpose is always to ensure efficient propagation using already established institutions.

Prevention of Fundamentalist Virus

With the advent of the scientific method, many of the manipulations of god viruses can be exposed. The Pope can no longer claim that the earth is the center of the universe. While many believe in prayer, they would rather trust their physician to heal their illness. Scientologists may claim that their E-meter tells all sorts of things about a person, but they dare not open it to the light of scientific inquiry.¹² Baptists may not like the idea that humans evolved from other creatures, but they have no way to put their creationist ideas to a test against say the Navaho or Hindu version of creation. These bastions of faith can be challenged through scientific inquiry.

Europe has not had a major fundamentalist outbreak since Hitler died, and Russia has avoided a major fundamentalist outbreak since the fall of the

¹¹ Campus Crusade For Christ, *USAFA Promotional Video* [video on-line] (filmed Summer 2002, accessed 21 November 2008); available from http://www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org/press-releases/ccc_usafa.html; Internet.

¹² The E-meter is a machine used by Scientology auditors to probe and make certain determinations about a person.

Soviet Union. These societies have strong science education and, so far, have avoided wholesale infection from the more virulent god viruses.

While we may never be fully safe from fundamentalism, the best prevention is solid education in the sciences. Right now, an experiment is going on in Asia and Russia. While the Marxist/communist religion has largely fallen out of favor, other religions have not been able to rush in and fill the void. This is not coincidental, as the governments of China and Russia have created and continue to develop a scientifically educated populace. They also monitor and interfere with outside religious efforts to infect their populations. In western countries where scientific education is strong, such as Germany, Sweden, Ireland, Hungary, The Netherlands, god viruses of all kinds have subsided in influence.¹³

Education is the key to perpetuation of the virus for the Taliban, Baptist or Catholic. If the virus cannot control public education, it will seek to divert resources from public coffers to fundamentalist school funding. From the madrassa schools of Pakistan to the Christian push for school vouchers in the United States, and the religious home school movement, religions seek to control education or to control the resources for education.

Non-Theistic Religions

Atheism as Religion?

Some claim that atheism is a religion. But that poses a problem of what you call people who do not believe in Zeus, Thor, Allah or even The Flying Spaghetti Monster!¹⁴ Atheism simply sees no evidence of any god.

"If Atheism is a religion, then health is a disease!"

-Clark Adams

Every religion we have mentioned has rituals, practices, holy writings or traditions, etc. Nothing like that has ever developed from Atheism. There

¹³ National Center for Education Statistics, *Mathematics and Science Achievement of Eighth-Graders between 1995 and 2003* (accessed 20 November 2008); available from http://nces.ed.gov/timss/resultso3_eighth95.asp; Internet.

¹⁴ If you are unfamiliar with the Flying Spaghetti Monster, see Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster [web site on-line] (accessed 20 November 2008); available from <http://www.venganza.org/>; Internet. I think you will be quite amused.

are no holy men, holidays or holy books, and no agreed-upon canons of faith. In fact, the only thing you can get some Atheists to agree upon is that there is no god.

Communism and Other Non-Theistic Religions

While Atheism may not be a religion, some non-theistic religions have holy books and godlike figures. Just as Martin Luther created the Protestant virus, Karl Marx created a Marxist virus based on tenets of faith in an historical imperative. Marx had no more evidence for his historical imperative than Christians do for a second coming of Christ. Marxism infected many hosts, mutated in ways that helped it survive and replicated in the minds of thousands, then millions. It eventually evolved into the various practices of communism that in almost all cases led to a cult of personality such as found in Stalinism, Maoism and others in Korea, Cambodia, Cuba and Romania.

While these are not technically theistic, the head is god-like in the sense that Caesar or Pharaoh was a god. Communist cults even worship their dead gods! Thus, Lenin has an elaborate tomb that is still visited by thousands of people every year. Kim Il-sung, former dictator of North Korea, died in 1994 but he is officially the “President of North Korea eternal” to this day! He is as much a god to the North Koreans as a dead Pharaoh was to the ancient Egyptians. It seems bizarre to the western mind to venerate a dead dictator, but how is that different than a Christian worshipping a dead Jesus or Shii’a Muslims visiting the tomb of Fatima in hopes of getting a blessing? The behavior looks remarkably similar whether it is worship of a Pharaoh, a dictator or a messiah.

The virus maintains strength or revives itself as long as the godhead is alive or perpetuated in some fashion. When the godhead dies, the god virus dissipates, and other religions may gain strength. Protestant churches are frantically working to gain market share in the former Soviet Union to take the place of communism and the Russian Orthodox Church. For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses have had so much success that they have been taken to court, sanctioned and banned from Moscow.¹⁵ Pentecostal religions are growing and have caught the ire of the Orthodox Church and the Russian

¹⁵ ReligiousTolerance.org, *Jehovah's Witnesses Oppression in Moscow, Russia* [article on-line] (June 17, 2004, accessed 20 November 2008); available from <http://www.religioustolerance.org/witness9.htm>; Internet.

government as well. The Orthodox virus is weak, so it enlists the help of political authorities to stop other viruses from intruding.

Parasitic Religions

In biology, some hosts are more susceptible to a certain virus than others, and various mutations have differing effects on the population as a whole. That is why you might get a cold but your spouse does not.

It is similar for god viruses. While Jehovah's Witnesses are unlikely to become the dominant religion of Russia, their particular virus has the ability to infect a certain portion of the population, as do those of Scientology, Pentecostals and Baptists. These are aggressive viruses that propagate through proselytizing, a more parasitic religious approach. The parasitic approach uses a horizontal strategy whereby new people are infected by the virus by jumping across social and family lines. A symbiotic approach, on the other hand, is more vertical – passing the virus down from one generation to the next. Most religions use both types of propagation to some degree but emphasize one more than the other.

Highly parasitic viruses tend to pick out hosts who are most susceptible and then dramatically control them. Thus, parasitic viruses are likely to tear intact families apart in order to break the convert away from potential diluting influences. A good example is the Unification Church or Family Federation for World Peace and Unification founded by Sun Myung Moon, also known as the Moonies. The Unification Church requires sexual abstinence before marriage and insists that all marriages must be approved, if not arranged, by the church. Thus, Sun Myung Moon has selected for marriage hundreds if not thousands of people from different cultures in an effort to propagate his virus across traditional cultural boundaries.

Not surprisingly then, one of the main complaints against the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia is its impact on families and society. According to an May 25, 2004 article¹⁶ by the organization *Religious Tolerance*:

Moscow courts have found the community guilty of forcing families to disintegrate, infringing the person, rights and freedoms of the citizen, encouraging suicide or the refusal on religious grounds of medical aid to the critically ill, and inciting

¹⁶ ReligiousTolerance.org, *Jehovah's Witnesses Oppression in Moscow, Russia* [article on-line] (June 17, 2004, accessed 20 November 2008); available from <http://www.religioustolerance.org/witness9.htm>; Internet.

citizens to refuse to fulfill their civil obligations established by law. Under Article 14 of the 1997 law, a religious organization may lose its legal status and have its activity banned on these grounds.

Parasitic religions demand a lot from their members and have strict behavioral or membership standards. Since they are constantly bringing in new members, the indoctrination and supervision must be rigorous. The hierarchy of the parasitic virus demands sacrifice of money and time from converts. Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna and the Unification Church all behave in this way.

Symbiotic Religions

Many religions are less parasitic and more symbiotic. For example, the Druze religion of Lebanon, Syria and Israel is closed to outsiders. It has not accepted converts for over eight hundred years. This is a vertical strategy, propagating down generations largely within family and cultural boundaries. Other religions have similar strictures, such as the Yazidi of Iraq or the Amish in the United States. If you are not born into the community, you cannot become a member. If conversion is allowed, the requirements are such that it is practically impossible or very difficult.

This can be a successful strategy. The community keeps the virus strong and, in turn, the virus binds the community closely together. Symbiotic religions, like the Druze, Yazidi and Amish, have so completely infected their members that the strictures of the religion become totally integrated into daily life. Many Hindu sects might also be seen as symbiotic as might Hutterites.

It All Depends ...

Many religions play both a parasitic and a symbiotic card depending on current circumstances. The Catholic virus tends to be somewhat symbiotic while at the same time having parasitic outbreaks. The Catholic virus was about as parasitic as possible during the conquests of Central and South America in the 16th century. The deaths of millions of native people were directly related to the practices of Catholic priests in facilitating the conquests. Despite the heroic efforts of a handful of priests like Bartolome

de Las Casas¹⁷, priests accompanying conquistadors and later settlers gave justification for the genocide and enslavement of whole peoples in the Americas. This is about as parasitic as a religion can be.

Of course, biological viruses and bacteria killed as many or more than the Catholic soldiers and priests, but the two acted in tandem – one facilitating the work of the other. Pope Benedict showed a surprising lack of awareness about the devastation his church caused when he made a major speech to the Bishops of Brazil in September 2007:

... what did the acceptance of the Christian faith mean for the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean? For them, it meant knowing and welcoming Christ, the unknown God whom their ancestors were seeking, without realizing it, in their rich religious traditions. Christ is the Saviour for whom they were silently longing. In effect, the proclamation of Jesus and of his Gospel did not at any point involve an alienation of the pre-Columbian cultures, nor was it the imposition of a foreign culture.¹⁸

Needless to say, his words evoked outrage among native groups and even many local priests. How can anyone be so blind unless he is completely infected with a god virus? Were people to say that the Jews were waiting for Hitler to show them the light, they would be called to task for such ignorance, but the Pope seems to get a free pass with such calloused statements.

Today the Catholic virus in Africa is going through a parasitic stage. By actively attacking condom use and birth control, the god virus facilitates the HIV virus. The result is conversion to Catholic sexual practices or death from HIV. Ironically, Catholicism has become extremely weak in its own home – Italy – where birth rates are among the lowest in the world. Somebody must be using condoms or birth control in Italy, or Italians have become remarkably celibate!

¹⁷ Bartolome de Las Casas (1484–1564) was a Dominican priest involved in some of the earliest voyages of conquest and settlement. He was largely responsible for starting a debate and protest in Spain over the conquistadors' treatment of Native Americans. He attempted to be the conscience of the King, Queen and Pope but largely lost the battle as priests accompanied by soldiers marched on in search of gold and slaves.

¹⁸ A Catholic Life, *Pope Benedict XVI's words on Native Americans to CELAM* [article on-line] (May 15, 2007, accessed 20 November 2008); available from <http://acatholiclife.blogspot.com/2007/05/pope-benedict-xvis-words-on-native.html>; Internet. Also found in the *LA Times*, 14 May 2007.

Summary

The god virus embodies strategies for survival and propagation. Advanced viruses have defenses that are more effective than others and, as a result, they have risen to dominance over the less developed. God viruses are always mutating, and new ones may break out of viral reservoirs at any time. The best prophylactic for god viruses, especially fundamentalist variants, is science education. The more science is taught or discussed, the fewer tools a god virus has to infect populations.