

The God Virus

**How Religion Infects
Our Lives and Culture**

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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.

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-

"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

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 Biological 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 madrasa 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.

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

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

-Clark Adams

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's 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.