

The God Virus

**How Religion Infects
Our Lives and Culture**

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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 a 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.