

What is religion?

Religions are replicators not unlike viruses.

Consider for a moment what a virus does. A virus invades and takes over replicating machinery from the original purpose and causes that machinery to instead replicate the virus. A typical biological virus invades a cell and reprograms the cellular mechanism to reproduce the virus until the cell bursts and releases new viral particles to infect other susceptible cells. This is analogous to the way a computer virus infects a computer and reprograms the computing machinery to replicate the virus and infect other computers.

A religion infects a mind and reprograms the mind to reproduce the religion.

This comparison is even more valid when one considers the behaviors of certain biological viruses. Take for example the Citrus Vein Enation Virus or CVEV. This virus causes galls and other growths on susceptible varieties of citrus trees. Interestingly, the galls are host to a large number of virus particles. This increases the likelihood of the virus being encountered by a chewing insect and thus being transported to new hosts. Such viral behavior is hardly limited to those infecting plants. In humans papillomaviruses (HPVs) cause growths commonly known as warts as well as cervical cancer. Another Virus, Epstein-Barr, is linked to Burkitt's lymphoma while hepatitis viruses are linked to cancer of the liver. One must consider that this is most likely not mere coincidence. Imagine for a moment two populations of a virus. One infects susceptible cells and destroys them as the cell bursts and releases new viral particles to infect other susceptible cells. The second population has evolved to interfere with the regulation of cellular reproduction. By doing so it greatly increases the number of the susceptible cell type - and in so doing is able to release a great many more viral particles to possibly infect new cells. These viruses are essentially tricking the virus factory into manufacturing some extra virus factories in addition to manufacturing viruses. The virus that is able to cause the proliferation of susceptible host cells enjoys a tremendous replicating advantage.

Now consider religion - particularly the features that emphasize production of new susceptible hosts for the religion to infect. The resource needed by biological viruses is susceptible cells. Some viruses have evolved to manipulate the susceptible cells into producing more susceptible cells. The resource required by religions is available minds. So it should come as no surprise that religions have evolved to manipulate susceptible minds into producing more susceptible minds.

In his book *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society*, Aaron Lynch refers to this characteristic of thought-based replicators as “quantity of parenthood.”

There are many common features of religions which can only be interpreted as “quantity of parenthood” memes.

What is a meme? The term “meme” was coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. One could think of a meme as the smallest unit of transmissible culture. One could also think of a meme as the cultural equivalent of a gene. A gene travels with compatible genes - forming a geneplex of genes which work well together. A meme travels with compatible memes - forming a memeplex. The concept of a memeplex first appeared in *The Meme Machine* by Susan Blackmore. A memeplex could be any collection of memes which work well together and are normally transmitted as a group. A language could be considered a memeplex. There are rules for spelling and grammar, parts of speech, and conjugation of verbs. A memeplex can evolve over time. Old memes may be dropped. Sometimes new memes are added. Other times memes are borrowed from other memeplexes. A meme can also change - affecting the entire memeplex in some way.

Using a language as an example of a memeplex we can illustrate each of these concepts. A language is transmitted by parents, schools, and books. One is not likely to hear anyone say “I beseech thee” outside the theater. The words “beseech” and “thee” would be examples of memes which have been dropped from the memeplex. New words or memes are added all the time. The term “meme” itself would be an example of a language evolving with the addition of a new word. Other words are trendy and come and go rapidly. “Unibrow,” “metrosexual,” and “bling” are examples. Some words or meanings are borrowed from other language memeplexes. “Petite” is borrowed from the French language memeplex. “Pajamas” is borrowed more or less intact from Hindi. The last examples to consider are parts of the English language memeplex which have changed over time. In an earlier chapter I used the word “browse” - which raised an immediate objection from my volunteer proofreader. Many people - like my proofreader - would see the word “browse” and first think of it in the context of something one does on the Internet. Older people might think of “browse” as something one might do in a venue such as a library. Very few people would read the word “browse” and immediately think of it as something for herbivores to eat. Yet that is the first definition in the dictionary.

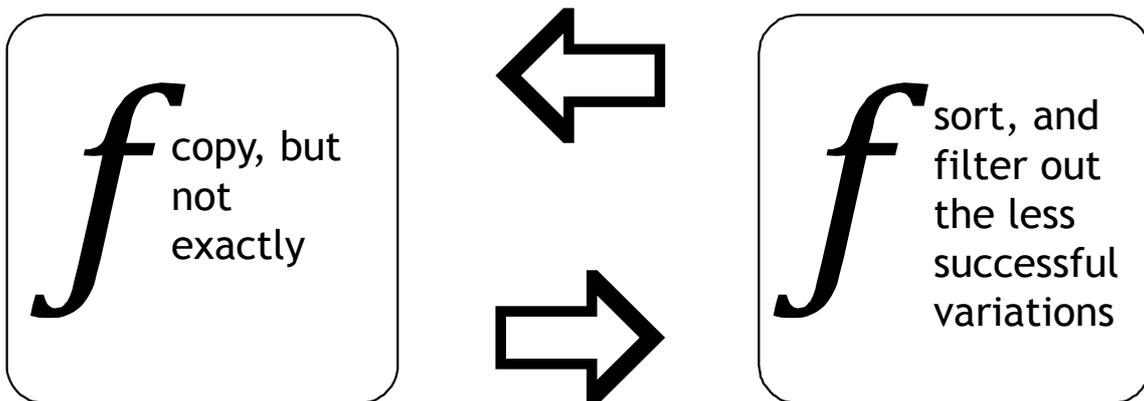
The memeplexes of religion evolve in all these same ways.

A religion is transmitted by parents, churches, books, and all too often by schools. As a religion is transmitted it may be changed. Thus as with evolution

within the biological realm, there is descent with change within the realm of memplexes of religion.

There is one more factor required to drive evolution. That factor is competition for resources. Within the realm of biological replicators the resources are things such as energy and materials. There is essentially only one resource required by memplexes of religion: the human mind. Thus religions compete for a finite number of humans minds in much the same way in which biological replicators compete for light, nutrients, or space.

There is an important difference between biological viruses and memplexes of religion. Recall that when considered in mathematical terms, the evolve function is best described as two functions. One is the “copy, but not exactly” function and the other is a “sort, and toss all but the most fit” function within which “fit” means best at surviving the sorting environment.



Biological viruses rely on sorting and culling a large number of apparently random mutations generated by the “copy, but not exactly” function. In contrast the memplexes of religion have “intelligent designers” to perform the “copy, but not exactly” function. These “intelligent designers” do not make random changes to the religion. Instead they make changes which they feel will make a better religion - usually motivated by power or profit.

Memplexes of religion are frequently engineered as “get rich quick” schemes. Recent and well-documented examples of these include Joseph Smith and the Mormon Church, L. Ron Hubbard and the Church of Scientology, plus all the variations of “televangelism”. Other memplexes of religion are engineered to confer power on the engineers. The Catholic Church is most likely the best example of this with Emperor Constantine playing a key role as he sought a

unifying religion to reinforce his position of power. All these patterns are important because they are repeated over and over throughout history.

There are other patterns which are instructive. One such pattern is a state religion in which the government is “legitimized” or reinforced by religious leaders and the religious leaders are “legitimized” or reinforced by the government. There appears to be such a relationship between the Shi’a clerics and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran. The early Catholic Church is also probably best understood in this light.

Another oft repeated pattern involves a prospective religious leader who receives special instructions and sanction from a deity - in private without witness. Joseph Smith, Moses, and Muhammad are all examples of people who claimed to have received divine instructions to take control over other people. Each of these examples has one feature in common: each divine communication was received without witness and was not subject to independent verification.

This chapter will be rounded out with the mapping of several religions onto a “tree of life” such as is commonly seen in biology textbooks - emphasizing that it is no coincidence that the branching is similar and emphasizing the clear descent with change. Most people are very familiar with the Abrahamic religions so we’ll examine that in terms of being a branch on an evolutionary tree of religion. Judaism is the first of the Abrahamic religions. Judaism is not a monolithic religion - it has many branches. There are branches for Hasidic Jews, Orthodox Jews, and Reform Jews among others. One branch of Judaism is “messianic Judaism.” This is the branch which gave rise to “Christianity.” The branch of “Christianity” in turn gave rise to a plethora of “Protestant” religions. The syncretic evolution of “Protestant” religions continued after the religions were carried across the Atlantic Ocean. “Protestant” religions gave rise to Mormonism after arriving on the North American continent. Mormonism is hardly the monolithic entity which people imagine. The very young religion of Mormonism already has multiple branches and mutations continue to arise. This is evidenced by “The Book of Immanuel David Isaiah” as well as other divisions over the practice of polygamy. In “The Book of Immanuel David Isaiah” Brian Mitchell casts himself as the latest prophet/messiah. This pattern of “improvement” introduced by charlatans is not limited to “Christianity” and is repeated for another major religion which branched from the cults of Judaism. Islam was created by “The Prophet” Muhammad. Internal power struggles and disagreements over doctrine have caused Islam to split - creating even more branches on the evolutionary tree of religion. The branches of Islam include Sunni Islam, Shi’a Islam and Wahhabism.

Schism is to religion what speciation is to biological life.

This chapter will also compare the adaptation of religion to a changed environment to adaptation of microbes - microbes in a hospital setting are exposed to non-lethal levels of antimicrobials and therefore develop resistance. Religions are exposed to non-lethal levels of rational inquiry (science) and as a result are evolving resistance. Emphasis should be on recognizing the pattern.

An additional point to be made in this chapter is that religion would have evolved much more quickly before the Gutenberg press and widespread literacy. There is clear evidence of this as Catholicism kept evolving even after the religion was committed to print - resulting in disparities between what is in the book and Catholic doctrine. For example the Bible is fairly clear on the principal that each congregation is a peer of every other congregation and that no congregation should subjugate itself to another. That is to say there should be no hierarchy of churches. Yet the Catholic Church is exactly that - a hierarchy of dioceses and archdioceses all answering to a chain of command topped by the Vatican. Another example of a disparity between what is written and dogma as practiced is the question of who is in heaven. Ask a Catholic where good souls have gone. Then ask them to show you the passage in the Bible to support their answer. They cannot show you. This is because the Bible says *everyone* is resurrected on Judgment Day. Catholicism most likely adapted because a delayed paradise was not as appealing as the paradise of the religion which existed in the Roman Empire before Catholicism. That earlier religion promised immediate rewarded to virtuous souls with instant access to the Elysian Fields. Catholicism was most likely adapted in order to better compete with the earlier religion.

Recommended reading:

Lynch, Aaron. Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society. New York: Basic Books, 1998.

Dawkins, Richard. The Selfish Gene. Oxford New York: The Oxford University Press, 1989.

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