

CORH Values – Season 1, Episode 6

Daniel Veidlinger on Religion as Viral Memes

Is it possible that Religion spreads in a way similar to a virus? How can Richard Dawkins' idea of Memes help us to understand how Religions evolve and spread in a way analogous to genes? Do chance developments play an outsized role in the success or demise of religions just as they do in the evolution of biological organisms?

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Transcript:

Hello, welcome to CORH Values, the religion and humanities podcast produced by the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities at California State University Chico. I'm your host and chair of the department, Daniel Veidlinger, each semester or I guess we should say season. We're going to be focusing on a different topic. And this season will be talking about health and pandemics. So in this season, we've been talking about disease, pandemics and religion. And different religions have had different views on why these things happen. Some religions see these as punishments from the gods for one thing. So there was no conception of the germ theory of disease. There was a spiritual element to illness and pandemics that involved it being some sort of punishment from God. And by purifying one's soul or by atoning for one since, or by changing one's lifestyle, one could hope to start to improve one's condition and overcome the disease. Well, today I want to consider the idea that perhaps religion itself can be thought of as a kind of virus. Religion might spread in ways that are similar to the way that the virus spreads. And of course, one of the key features of this is that a virus doesn't have a mind of its own, spreads because the hosts inadvertently spread it. So religion as a cultural construct, is a collection of ideas and practices. And those ideas and practices may be spread from one person to another through various means. Means that might not be what you think they are. How do they spread? Well, in today's podcast, we're going to explore one possible answer to that question, the theory of which have often been called virus of the mind. So let's look into it more deeply. Richard Dawkins suggested that culture can be broken up into individual units that make up the culture. And those units might spread and change and evolve in a way that is analogous to the way the genes do. And he coined the term memes to refer to these units of evolution and spread the constitute a culture. This emerged in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. And towards the end in Chapter 11, he began to speculate. There may be other elements that evolve in a way analogous to the way biological genes evolve. See the process of evolution is not necessarily something that only occurs with genes. Genes are simply the particular way that our human biological evolution has played out. But the medium in which information is conveyed could be anything. See evolution is simply the transmission of information from one unit to another with slight changes that evolve by chance. And when those changes are advantageous, the units carrying that change will prosper. So to understand how this applies to religion, we've got to dig a little bit deeper into it. Dawkins, in his book, points out that the thing that is so special about genes is that they are replicators. He says examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catchphrases, clothing, fashions, ways of making pots are building arches. And justice genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs. So memes propagate themselves in the meme pool. By leaping from brain to brain. You can have whole complexes of memes that basically constitute what we call religion. So let's be clear. Religion is a huge edifice that is composed of many different memes. According to this view, just like a human being is a complicated organism that is composed of many, many different genes, each one governing a different feature of the entity. The term meme is quite well now, nowadays, except that people don't quite use it correctly, at least not according to the Darwin's understanding of it. So nowadays, when we talk about a meme. People usually think of some popular picture with a funny saying associated with it. It might be a picture of a grumpy cat. Or nowadays, it might be a picture of Bernie Sanders at the inauguration of President Biden wearing a ramp, old, old codes and handmade Mittens. But the idea is that these memes are photos that become very popular and are shared from one person to the other and quickly go as they say, go viral and are traded and shown between people all over the world through the internet. So, yes, that's absolutely what a meme is, except that everything is a meme. So when we use

the word meme in today's popular culture, people usually mean a popular picture that has been going around. But really any picture or any saying or any idea that is transmitted from one person to another is a meme. The difference is that in Darwin's understanding, a meme competes against other memes, just like genes compete against other genes. And the ones that are reproduced more often are the ones that succeed and become well known throughout the world. In the same way that with evolution we have some genes that code for traits and other genes that code for another trait. And the organisms that, that have the genes with one trait? If that trait is not as useful as they will slowly start to fade away and go into extinction. And the organisms that bear a different gene that creates more useful features on that organism. That organism will be more successful and replicate more and will eventually overtake the other one. But they all contain genes. It's just that some are more successful than others. So you have to think of memes in the same way. Any picture that you share to a friend is a meme, but some might not be successful. So the misunderstanding here, so we just use the term memes to name the successful ones, the ones that everybody is sending to everybody. But we have to think in terms of all ideas, all pictures, all statements, all being memes. And there is an evolutionary environment. Namely, let's say the Internet, in which all of these pictures and ideas and things can go back and forth. And some are replicated, meaning some are sent by people to yet more people. And those people, if they like them, send them to again yet more people. And it grows exponentially until everybody has heard of this meme. And of course, we only have so much time in the day. So this competition, because the memes that aren't as funny or interesting just don't get sent by people to as many people, and therefore they eventually fade away and go extinct. Whereas the really successful ones, like Grumpy Cat, will just be around forever. And religions are a series of ideas, some of which instantiate in practices, actual physical things that people do in the world. Others remain in the realm of ideas. But nevertheless, these are all memes. These are all units, ideas that can be transmitted from one person to another. One of the key features of the meme theory and of biological evolution. And it's probably the one that is most commonly misunderstood because it says a lot about what it means to be human. And that is that it is completely and utterly governed by chance. That is the key ingredients in any understanding of evolution, no matter what medium it happens in. Whether it happens in flesh and blood, or paper and pen or computer screens. Darwinian evolution by natural selection. Properly understood is completely and utterly random, which means there is no guiding force. There is no purpose to it. It just happens because it happens. So in terms of biological evolution, the biggest misunderstanding is, is what we call Lamarckianism. Lamarck was a scientist in the early 19th century, just before Darwin. And he believed that acquired characteristics could be inherited. Unlike Darwin, he said that natural selection is what allows characteristics to emerge. This view holds that the reason organisms evolve is because they somehow want to evolve. So a classic example is. Giraffe. A giraffe has a very long neck, and that neck enables them to eat leaves that are higher up on the tree. Those leaves would not have been eaten by many of the other smaller animals in the area. So it gives the giraffe an advantage because the giraffe can then eat food that hasn't been eaten by other animals there. Now, you can picture giraffe like being that emerged millions of years before what we know as a giraffe. Living in the savannas and trying to eat these leaves, seeing that the lower leaves are being, had been eaten already by the small animals. So it's kind of stretching up to kind of reach that the higher leaves. But it can't quite reach them. But because of years of stretching, when it has babies, those babies next is slightly longer because the parents had been stretching their necks all the time to try to reach that food higher up. And then yet again, those children have children whose necks are yet longer because they also were stretching to eat this food. In other words, it is some sort of intentionality behind it. But that is not the case. We don't evolve because we want to evolve. We evolve because by chance, some offspring have a genetic mutation that lead to them having whatever trait it is. So let's stick with the giraffe example because it's fairly straightforward. So what actually happened is not that the ancestors of our modern day giraffes with shorter necks were stretching and stretching and eventually their children had long necks because of that, what happened is by chance, some of the ancestors of the giraffes had children that had longer necks, but it has nothing to do with whether they wanted it or not. It just a chance genetic mutation. And that conferred an advantage on those offspring because they were in fact able to eat leaves. They were out of reach of many of the other animals. So they had more of a food supply. So therefore, their offspring, the offspring that contain this new gene that was in their parents, those offspring will succeed because they'll all have that new gene. And the other cousins of these giraffes that didn't have this new gene. They will not do as well because they won't have as much food as the other ones that have the new gene have. And therefore, over time, that group will succeed in that area. The other ones will become extinct. And you now have the

new version of the giraffe that has yet a longer neck. And that's how evolution occurs. There's nothing guiding it other than pure chance and the environments in which they exist. So of course, if there were only trees that were quite short, like short bushes, but not tall trees in a certain environment. And an animal was born with a longer neck, it would actually be a disadvantage in that environment because it would have a harder time bending down the neck to reach the food. So evolution is a process that occurs when we have certain conditions. We have to have a replicator, some entity that makes copies of itself. That's one condition. The next condition is that the copies cannot always be a 100 percent the same, right. So if it's always a 100 percent the same, then there will be no evolution, whatever it is that replicates. We'll just continue replicating itself into eternity with no changes. So we have to have replication, but it can't be perfect. It's got to have some slight imperfections in it that lead to changes, random changes in the offspring. We then have to have limited resources so that some of the changes will confer an advantage over the others. So again, if they were unlimited resources, let's look at food is a simple example. If there was unlimited food for all beings on Earth, then there are also wouldn't really be evolution. Because if there were changes, you would just have the beings with those changes continuing to exist with those changes forever. And the old beings without those changes also continuing to exist forever, right? Because there's enough food for everybody to go around. So for evolution to happen, in other words, for a species to kind of change over time, you have to have the copies that aren't the same. So leading to slightly difference. Entities are organisms. But you also have to have limited resources such that the old organism that doesn't have these new changes that are better, that old organism will slowly die off. So you'll only have the new one. But what Dawkins says, what Richard Dawkins says is that not only do you need these things, but he says that in fact they are sufficient for evolution. So in other words, whenever you have these things, there will be evolution. And he points out that in the case of culture, we have replicator is right. We know that we have ideas that are spread from one person to the other. We also have imperfections in the spreading, right? So we know that when you tell somebody something, they don't then repeat it to their friend. And exactly the same way that you did. These are facts. There's no disputing that. And we also know that we have limited resources. In this case, it's not food, but it's mental space. Man, a human being can only remember so many things. So if some ideas are less useful, they will eventually be forgotten and dropout and the other ideas will stay. So we have all of the elements that are necessary for evolution in the cultural environment. And therefore, there's every reason to believe that there really is evolution in culture. Now, I should point out that the whole idea of biological evolution that was championed by Charles Darwin, that idea actually emerged from his observation of culture. This is a somewhat little known fact that many of the early evolutionary thinkers and Darwin wasn't the only one he was building on some other people. But they had all noticed in the mid 19th century. They noticed that languages appear to evolve. They realized, and this comes out of historical philology, where people began to study the development of ancient languages and they found manuscripts and they had the Rosetta Stone to translate hieroglyphics. And they began to learn about the different variants of ancient Greek and ancient Sanskrit. And they realized that languages seem to change, that they evolve based upon a principle that is not managed by humans. In other words, there's some force outside of human control, the causes languages to evolve. So for example, in English, 50 years ago, the word they mats plural, third-person. They are going to the store. But nowadays, as there's been an attempt to find a word that is non gender specific. There's been many ideas forward it, but people who tend to just to use the word they to refer to a singular person, his gender, you don't know or do not wish to include. Nobody decided on this. Just happened. And in 50 years time, people won't even remember this whole debate about this and they'll just think, well, they means plural or singular if you don't want to say or don't know the gender. And they began to think, well, maybe that can be used as a model for biological evolution. So let's try to put this altogether with respect to what this means is that what we call religion might just be a complex of memes that all act together. And how did these memes emerge? Well, if we take this theory at face value, what it means is that for whatever reason, some people in ancient times came up with an idea of doing something some way. And it doesn't really matter what their intentions were. So this is a really big feature of this theory that what people wanted to do, why they did it. All of that doesn't really matter. All that matters is the fact that they did it once they do something, that thing takes on a life of its own that is outside of their control. This is why there's so much resistance, this kind of theory, because it basically takes human agency away entirely. It suggests that everything that we have around us, not just religion, but of course, all cultural artifacts are simply thereby chance. They didn't emerge because people thought about it and directed culture or ideas to move in a certain way. They are here because by chance somebody thought of something. And actually the

reasons why they thought a bit, the reasons why they did it, their intentions regarding how they expected it to play out are of no concern whatsoever. So now let's back up and go to religion again. So you have a bunch of people, let's say 3000 years ago. And for whatever reason, one of them decides, we can't eat a certain food. So in fact, the dietary laws are an easy one to talk about in these terms because it's something that many people are familiar with. A lot of religions have them. In Judaism, it's called cash roots. In Islam, you have the laws that allowed this many religions that have various dietary restrictions. Now, why did they emerge? How did they emerge? What, what's the meaning behind them? In this theory, the idea is that there is no meaning. They just emerged because for whatever reason, somebody decided, let's say, in Judaism, with the loss of cash root. So it's commonly known. Probably most of the listeners know that Jews are not supposed to eat pork because it is not kosher. So let's say somebody decided that we're not allowed to eat pork. Once that decision God made, the really interesting part becomes, how does that play out? Does it confer an advantage of some sort to the people that are not eating pork? Or is it detrimental? Now here's where we also run into yet another controversial problem. And that is that many people say, Well, I think I know why the Jews are not supposed to eat pork because pork carry is trichinosis. That's a very dangerous disease if you get it, is a high chance that you might die. And therefore by avoiding pork. These ancient peoples, especially before they knew how to cook and clean properly like we do nowadays. These ancient people were not getting sick from trichinosis and that's why they don't eat pork. Now, on its face, this seems to make a little bit of sense, but it doesn't really bear out evolutionarily. Because how common was trichinosis and wouldn't really have affected the whole reproduction of the people and the religion. It's hard to say, but I'm genetic analysis of this actually points out that the survival of the organism is actually not what we care about. And this is another point that Richard Dawkins made in his revolutionary book, *The Selfish Gene*. One of the key ideas is that it is not the survival of the organism that drives the success of evolutionary variance. Rather, it's the success of the transmission of the gene. And what happens to the organism itself. After it's transmitted. The gene is actually a little concern evolutionarily speaking. So in other words, obviously you have to live long enough to reproduce. But after that point, what happens to you is of less concern evolutionarily speaking. So in terms of religion, if you want to do a truly dark Kinsey in mimetic analysis of why some practice might stick around and become popular and why others might fade away. You actually don't want to look necessarily know nothing you can't, but when it gets very complicated, but in general, the first place you look, let's put it that way, is not how the meme or idea strengthens the physical fitness of the person carrying. Rather, you want to focus on the likelihood of the idea itself being transmitted. That's all that matters. So one of the few scholars who've worked deeply on these questions, the most prominent one is Daniel Dennett, a philosopher at Tufts University who's done a lot of work on memes and how they construct our culture, how they construct the way our brain operates. And he wrote a book called *Breaking the Spell*, about how religions emerge. And he points out, if we look at a meme that leads to, let's say, suicide bombing by religious fundamental. You would think that this would not be a successful meme because it kills the person that carries it. But that's because you're thinking in the wrong terms. The success of a meme is not necessarily, again, it may be a Mustang. It's not connected, but it's not necessarily connected to the health and survival of the person that carries the mean. So a suicide bomber might get this idea in their head that they have to kill some enemy of their religion in order for them to go to heaven. And they go ahead and do it, so that kills them. But if they make a video, for example, talking about why they did it, they spread that video on the Internet at once, people here that he actually did do it, they gain a certain respect. And that leads to even more people seeing the video where he talks about why he's doing it and why you should do a to the fact that he died is actually likely to spread the meme more rather than to impede the success of the mean. Let's say that different religion, Let's use Judaism as an example, has strict dietary laws. These are things you're allowed to eat, and those are things you are not allowed to eat. And those ideas are passed on from generation to generation. Well. If you have a group that doesn't eat certain things, that automatically differentiates them from all the other groups around them. And the more they do that, the stronger their identity becomes. So a complex of memes that lead one religion to have a strong identity marked by such things as what they're allowed to wear, what they're allowed to eat. A meme complex that does that is going to have evolutionary staying power. Because all the meme need to do to exist is to be passed on down. So these memes, It's a complex, right? So it's not just one religion is a complex of a bunch of memes. And one of the memes in that complex is kind of a key to the other ones. And that is the idea that you have to pass these memes down to the next generation. You have not only a bunch of memes telling you what to do, what to dress, what to eat, etc. But you also have memes telling you to tell the next-generation about these

memes. And what that does is it ensures that they will be replicated. And once they're replicated, they are happy. And the memes will do anything they can to get replicated. Not at the memes have a mind of their own. But when we say that, we mean that metaphorically, just like if there's a stone on the top of the hill, you might say, well, the stone wants to roll down the hill. So if you want to make sure it doesn't, you better put a brace up there to hold it in place because the stone wants to run down the hill. Now when we say that everybody understands what you mean, naturally would go down the hill, we don't mean that the stone has a mind and wants to. So we talk about memes wanting this, that we mean that naturally this will happen. And if you don't want to tap and you've got these certain things to oppose it. So anyway, these means will get replicated. And that is why, according to this theory, Judaism has these rules. So in other words, when somebody says Why are Jews not allowed to eat certain foods, the mimetic answer would simply be because by doing that, there are Jews. And there are, there is a collection of Jewish memes that gets passed on down. It's simply, it is because it is. Let's look at viruses for a minute. Because I think it's hard to talk about these things because when we use language, it's always keyed to the way we see the world. And we see the world in terms of agency and people wanting things and animals wanting things, and even non-living entities wanting things. And so when I talk about, I talk about wants are due. But really this view, it's not about desires or wants or anything. It's pure existentialism. Whatever exists, exists, and it exists because it exist. So let's look at the coronavirus remanent. We've been hearing that there have been new variants that have evolved and they are more contagious. And I've heard my friends say, wow, these viruses are so smart. Look at how they're able to thwart our defenses and they're evolving in such a way that they're even more contagious. Well, we can talk about them that way, but has nothing to do with smartness. It is simply chance of the billions or trillions of viruses around each time they replicate, there's a chance that there will be a misfiring and some slight difference will emerge. So there's all sorts of differences that have emerged and all these viruses over the past year, most of them are harmless or don't do anything, or even are detrimental to the virus, so it dies off. But by chance, some of those changes might make the virus more contagious. And obviously, those are the ones that are going to be prominence precisely because they're more contagious versus not like the virus wants to be more contagious and therefore produces a more continuous version of itself, but rather show them more contagious version emerge. Obviously we're going to hear about it because it is more contagious. People often say, why do viruses make a sneeze? Isn't that brilliant? That the virus makes a sneeze and that transmitted from one person to the other. But no, there are billions of different viruses over time that have evolved. The ones that happened by chance to make you sneeze are the ones that stick around. Because the ones that don't make you sneeze die out because they're not transmitted from one person to the next and then can't reproduce in that person's cells. But the ones that happened to make you sneeze are the ones that get transmitted and stick around and become the viruses that we know about in human society. So in the same way, a religion that happens to have some trait, let's say it's dietary law that leads it to create a strong identity in the people. Because they're eating different foods. So they're always reminded that we are different from the others who eat pork around us. That is going to succeed. And it may appear as if it was a brilliant idea. How could they have imagined that this idea of having a separate kind of diets would create such a strong group identity that it would exist for 3000 years or maybe more. Well, they couldn't have known that actually. And there's many ancient religions that arose, but they died out. Why? Because it was obviously something about them that didn't catch on. And it's impossible really to know exactly what it might have been. The so many complicated factors that go into something succeeding in society and something failing. And we really don't know. But the proof, as they say, is in the putting. Some religions have succeeded for thousands of years, others have not. So there's obviously something about those religions that catches on and allows them to be transmitted from one generation to the next. And something about the religions that have gone extinct that didn't quite work, that didn't lead to successful propagation. And we can try to analyze it in retrospect. We may be right and we may be wrong. It's in my opinion, virtually impossible to actually know because there are just so many factors that contribute to the reason why one religion succeeds and another one fails. So all we're left with is really the raw evidence that is incontrovertible that such and such religion has been around for so many years and has so many adherence. And this other religion has only been around for that many years and has this lower number of adherence. And that's basically what we have to go on. But what we do know is that it has to be the case that there was something about the complex of memes that constitute that religion. The cost to succeed. And something about the complex of memes the constituted another religion like Manichaeism or myth, racism or whatever it may be that caused it to fail. So this is a journey into the mimetic view of religion. And I think it's a good way to finish off our

season on viruses, pandemics and religion by looking at religion as if it were a kind of a virus or epidemic that spreads. Now, I do want to just say that all the ideas I spoke to you about are very controversial. I've thought about them a lot. I don't know how much I agree with them. I'm trying to give them a sympathetic reading here. The three people you might want to read, who are the best and most serious scholars of this idea are? Susan Blackmore has a book called The Meme Machine that I would highly recommend. I've already mentioned Daniel Dennett's book, Breaking the Spell about the origins of religion. And of course, there is the book that started it all, The Selfish Gene by Richard Dawkins. And there's a number of websites and blogs and YouTube videos that explain with diagrams how memes operate. So please feel free to look into that if you want to learn more about it. If you'd like to learn more about the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities, please go to our website at [CSU Chico.edu slash CORH](http://CSUChico.edu/CORH) that's [CSU CHICO.edu slash CORH](http://CSUChico.edu/CORH). I want to point out that the opinions expressed here and do not necessarily reflect those of the faculty and staff of our department.