

## Genes and the Blasphemy Meme

by  
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The “meme” (pronounced *meem*) helps understand some puzzles about human society and the way we think and act. For example, although Pakistanis are a civilized people, why do so many of us want blasphemers to be put to death? And why is Mumtaz Qadri, who pumped 22 bullets into Governor Salman Taseer, a hero for so many black-coated Pakistani lawyers? Memes may also explain why the concoction “Allah hafiz”, coined during General Zia-ul-Haq’s evangelical decade, has almost totally chased out the traditional “Khuda hafiz” as our parting salutation.

The meme is a concept created in 1976 by Richards Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist. He defines it as “a piece of thought” which is transferrable from person to person by imitation. Stories, jokes, songs, gossip, fashions, or salutations are all memes. Other memes grip the mind and ultimately create political systems. For example, Nazism came as Hitler’s memes spread from brain to brain until they gripped almost the entire German nation.

In inventing memes, Dawkins was obviously inspired by the concept of genes. We all know what genes are: they are large collections of atoms that pass vital information from parents to progeny. The shape of your nose, color of hair, and size of brain were all transmitted to you via genes, which then replicated themselves and will be subsequently transferred onwards, perhaps in slightly mutated form.

Memes are a bit more abstract than genes. They are not made of DNA or atoms. Like computer viruses that proliferate on the internet and weigh nothing, memes can jump from mind to mind. While genes compete to find their expression in cells, memes compete amongst each other for pasting neuronal patterns in our brains. Some people go to an extreme and say that every thought we think is a meme gotten from school, madrassa, mosque, peers, parents, television, newspapers, etc.

Some memes are more successful than others. The meme containing the notion that blasphemy is the direst of crimes deserving extreme punishment has done extremely well. It has “cut-and-pasted” itself into millions of minds. Today those Pakistanis who say that blasphemy should indeed be penalized – but that the penalty should be less than death – stand to lose their own lives.

Reflecting the meme’s success, the rate of blasphemy accusations has hugely increased. From 1927 to 1984 there were only 9 registered cases of blasphemy in the area that is now Pakistan. After the introduction of amendments in 1982 and 1986, the rate of reported blasphemy cases is much larger. According to Ijaz ul Haq, son of General Zia-ul-Haq, about 5000 cases of blasphemy were registered between 1984-2004. A total of 964 people were charged; 479 Muslims, 340 Ahmadis; 119 Christians, 14 Hindus and 10 others.

Why has the blasphemy meme succeeded so well? The answer lies in evolutionary biology, a fundamental principle of which says that only those actions and thoughts are well received that help strengthen group identity. We humans instinctively desire working together as a group – strength lies in unity. The herd instinct that gave our Neolithic ancestors better chances to survive and reproduce remains intact today.

This instinct also underlies morality – the set of principles that tell us the difference between right and wrong. Moral actions are those that strengthen the group; immoral actions those that weaken it. Quite correctly, therefore, evolutionary psychologists like Jonathan Haidt call our moral instincts “groupish”.

This morality both “binds and blinds”. For example, madrassa A belonging to Firqa X and madrassa B belonging to Firqa Y – each wants its morality memes to propagate. Within each *maktab* and madrassa, whether Deobandi or Bareilvi, every meme binds members together while blinding them to what outsiders think. Since critical thinking is frowned upon, the memes receive a hospitable environment.

The benefits of group membership are great but, of course, membership dues have to be paid. Punishing blasphemers (even alleged ones will do) can be part of the payment. This can easily generate heroes. Generically speaking, all groups in competition – religious and ethnic groups included – have heroes. True heroes are altruists – they do something big for the group, not something just for themselves such as financial gain. Those who kill a group enemy at peril to their own lives are then epitomized as having performed the highest service. Mumtaz Qadri, was not the first hero to be celebrated.

Also celebrated was the 19-year old illiterate who killed Raj Pal, the publisher of the book “Rangeela Rasool”. Subsequently executed by the British, the youth was held in the highest esteem by the founders of Pakistan, Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Jinnah had been Ghazi ILM Din’s lawyer.

It is also reported that Allama Iqbal, regarded as Islam’s pre-eminent 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, placed the body in the grave with tears in his eyes and said: “This young man left us, the educated men, behind.” ILM Din is venerated by a mausoleum over his grave in Lahore. Through their actions, Mr. Jinnah and Allama Iqbal were paying their membership dues.

Men in a state of mind to kill, or be killed, have long fascinated scientists. The Nobel Prize winning ethologist, Konrad Lorenz, says before the final moment they experience the “Holy Shiver” (called *heiliger schauer* in German). In his book “On Aggression” (1966), Lorenz describes this as the tingling of the spine that humans experience when performing a heroic act in defense of their communities. He relates it to the pre-human reflex for raising the hair on the back of an animal as it confronts a larger adversary.

For men, Lorenz says, “A shiver runs down the back and along the outside of both arms. All obstacles become unimportant ...instinctive inhibitions against hurting or killing disappear...Men enjoy the feeling of absolute righteousness even as they commit atrocities.”

The Holy Shiver is that which a brave fighter feels while defending his group or country. It is also what a killer of blasphemers feels, or a suicide bomber experiences just before he presses the switch on his ball-bearing filled jacket. Once memes have captured the mind, their job is over.

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