

The Evolution of Indra Nonviolence as Recessive Meme

By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
August 7, 2011

When I first started using the word *meme* many years ago, I always had to interrupt my main point with an explanation of what it means. Nowadays I merely scan the eyes and facial affect of those I'm speaking with for signs of understanding, then usually continue on. Although it's not there just yet, the word *meme* is rapidly becoming part of our common vocabulary. But in case you haven't heard it used before, it was coined by evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. In it, he suggests that ideas behave very much like genes. They evolve, reproduce, and compete for dominance in order to assure their survival well into the future. So, just as life ends up looking like the genes that are most successful at replicating, that is, repeating themselves, human culture ends up looking very much like its most dominant ideas. Thus, in contrast to the primordial soup of biological evolution, Dawkins writes:

The new soup is the soup of human culture. We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. "Mimeme" comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like "gene." I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*.¹

As a devotee of reality, I'm often the first to contrast the difference between pragmatism and idealism, and to complain about all the idealogues around today, pounding square pegs into round holes, by insisting the world must conform to their ideas, rather than basing their ideas on the world as it really is. Rejecting the irrefutable facts of evolution in favor of an ancient creation myth is one example. Refusing to increase revenues in a bankrupt nation by taxing those who can most afford it, is another. Yet, pragmatist that I am, even I must admit our ideas have a physical quality, and the similarity Dawkins sees between the behavior of genes and ideas is more than a mere metaphor.

What I mean by this is that ideas are part of our neurology, part of our brains. There are over a trillion neurons in the average human brain, and the more times we think the same thought, the more deeply it becomes embedded into our brain tissue. Thoughts, through repetition, become neural pathways, and eventually we start thinking the same way most of the time. Blue, for example, is a neural pathway. We have receptors in our brain, engraved through repetitive experience, that cause us to always associate a certain sensual experience with our concept of the color

¹ Dawkins, Richard, *The Selfish Gene*, Chapter 11, [First published 1976; 1989 edition: Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-286092-5 (paperback)]

blue. The word *paradigm*, in fact, which we use when referring to certain distinct concepts, comes from the Greek word for “pattern,” παραδειγμα. So a paradigm is, literally, a repetitive or habitual way of thinking. And these habits, these pathways, are engraved on the brain, just as trails are eventually beaten onto the ground after we continuously take the same route.

Ideas, to some extent, then, are physical. They are etched into our brains, literally beaten into our heads over time. And the more dominant the idea, the more entrenched it becomes. Sometimes these neural pathways take over entire fields of concentration—religious fields, political fields, economic fields—so much so that they encroach upon the habitat of other ideas, forcing them to flee, starve, and, sometimes, become extinct. Our dominant ideas tend to take over, and, as a survival technique, don’t like making room for new ideas, for new patterns, new ways of thinking, for fear of losing some ground themselves and eventually going the way of the Dodo.

But the important point for us, once we understand this concept, is to determine what memes are most dominant in our own culture, and to ask ourselves if they are really true, or have they merely bullied their way onto our collective field of consciousness and squeezed out the real truth? Conservative ideas favoring God, Country, Patriotism, Family Values, Right to Life, for example, are dominant ideas in our culture, and those who hold them are loathe to entertain different opinions, for fear of altering the flavor of our cultural soup. But just because these ideas are popular or have been around a long time, doesn’t mean they are wholly true. Without genuine dialogue, conflict, and competition, culture cannot evolve and advance any better than life can. Without making room for new ideas and opinions, new information in the meme pool, our culture cannot adapt and will die.

Yet not all ideas have to be new or innovative. There are many ideas that have been around for a long time, in some cases, far longer than those that now dominate and define our culture, that have merely been squeezed out of their natural habitat. We can call these kind of ideas *recessive memes* because, like recessive genes, their unusual characteristics still show up now and then.

Perhaps the most dominant meme in our culture is the idea of *domination* itself. Indeed, ours has often been described as a “dominator culture,” meaning the notion that a few have the right to control and exploit others has been beaten, often literally, into our brains. I first encountered this notion in Terrance McKenna’s book, *Food of the Gods*, who borrowed it from historian Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade*. McKenna succinctly explains, “Dominator cultures are hierarchical, paternalistic, materialistic, and male-dominated.”² The problem with this dominator meme, if not already apparent, is, as he goes on to say, “We are killing the planet in order to keep intact the wrongheaded assumptions of the ego-dominator cultural

² McKenna, Terrance, *Food of the Gods*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1992, 1933, p. xx.

style.”³ Theologian Walter Wink says, similarly, “[The Domination System] is characterized by unjust economic relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchal power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all.”⁴ This destructive meme, according to Eisler herself, “is internalized from birth by every child brought up in a traditional, male-dominated family.”⁵ In short, this idea has been beaten into our heads ever since the day we were born, not only through traditional family values and structures, but also through the media. Virtually every story we read, hear, or see, in books, movies, and even children’s cartoons, is the same story. “It is the dominant myth in contemporary America,” Wink says:

It enshrines the ritual practice of violence at the very heart of public life, and even those who seek to oppose its oppressive violence do so violently... the myth of redemptive violence is played out in the structure of children’s cartoon shows (and is found as well in comics, video and computer games, and movies). But we also encounter it in the media, in sports, in nationalism, in militarism, in foreign policy, in televangelism, in the religious right, and in self-styled militia groups. It is celebrated in the Super Bowl, in the Rambo movies, by motorcycle and street gangs, and by the general pursuit of machismo. What appears as innocuous in cartoons is, in fact, the mythic underpinnings of our violent society.⁶

But does this have to be so? Has the dominator meme become so entrenched in our culture there is no longer room for any other possibility, for any other way of being? Faux News may suggest this is the case, but I prefer to consider this question in light of Hinduism’s myth of Indra. Ancient dominator myths abound, from the Babylonian myth of Marduk, to the Greek god Zeus, to the Nordic god Thor, to, at times, the Hebrew god, Yahweh. But I like the story of Indra because it suggests there is another idea, a recessive meme based on the opposite of domination, based on the idea of nonviolence, that is also part of the natural human condition.

As the story goes, at the moment of his conception, Indra conquered Vritra, the god of drought, by beating him to death with a hammer—thus explaining all the thunder and lightning that preceded the rainfall that quenched the parched and barren ground, causing Indra’s warlike worshippers to celebrate. I have slain Vritra,” he boasts, “O ye hast’ning Marutes; I have grown mighty through my own great vigour; I am the hurler of the bolt of Thunder—For man flow freely now the gleaming waters.” But their worship of domination, their faith in violence, was not always the case for these ancient Aryans. As Karen Armstrong explains, “It was a quiet, sedentary existence... They farmed their land, herded their sheep, goats, and pigs, and valued stability and continuity. They were not warlike people, since, apart

³ Ibid., p. xxi.

⁴ Wink, Walter, *The Powers that Be*, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1998, p. 39.

⁵ Eisler, Riane, *The Chalice and the Blade*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1987, 1995, p. 168.

⁶ Wink, *ibid.*, p. 48f.

from a few skirmishes with one another or with rival groups, they had no enemies and no ambition to conquer new territory.”⁷

But once they ventured from the fertile steppes of Southern Russia into the hot arid Indian desert, their priorities changed, and their need for water reigned supreme. So they turned from their egalitarian beliefs to the worship of Indra, once a minor figure, because he had the power to violently break open the stubborn clouds. And, in the process of making this their dominant myth, they became a dominator culture. “The old Aryan religion had preached reciprocity, self-sacrifice, and kindness to animals,” Armstrong says, “This was no longer that appealing to the cattle rustlers, whose hero was the dynamic Indra, the dragon slayer, who rode in a chariot upon the clouds of heaven. Indra was now the divine model to whom the raiders aspired.”⁸ In the Rigveda, Indra boasts firsthand of his exploits, “Heroes with noble horses,” he cries, “fain for battle, selected warriors call on me in combat. I, bountiful Indra, excite in conflict, I stir the dust, Lord of surpassing vigour.”⁹ And so the peaceful Aryans traded in their slow oxen for fast horses, transforming their heavy wooden carts into fiery war chariots, enacting the story of Indra—“on Earth as it is in Heaven”—by plundering, pillaging, and terrorizing their helpless neighbors. Armstrong says that, “When they fought, killed, and robbed, the Aryan cowboys felt themselves one with Indra and the aggressive devas who had established the world order by force of arms.”¹⁰

But before Indra rose to reign supreme, and his worshippers created their dominator culture, they had to first suppress that other meme that had so long influenced their more peaceful existence. So, as the myth continues, Brahman, the dreamer of the world, created Tvashtri to deprive Indra of his throne, although the three-headed sage would never do so by resorting to violence. Tvashtri, rather, was an ascetic who, with his first head, read the Vedas; with the second, nourished himself; and with the third, contemplated everything. He is said to have surpassed everyone in his love for wisdom and in the pious humility of his heart. Yet Indra felt threatened by him and struck Tvashtri down with a thunderbolt. Even in death, however, the peaceful sage's body radiated a glorious light. So Indra tried decapitating him. Still, out of each head came a flurry of doves escaping in every direction.

If Tvashtri's radiance represents his wisdom, and the birds flurrying from his decapitated body symbolize his peaceful thoughts, then this story suggests that our ideas, our memes, can't easily be destroyed, and might radiate and fly outward until they find new places to light upon. Like recessive genes, these friendlier memes continue to show up from time to time, in the lives of people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, for example, despite the dominator culture's they lived in.

⁷ Armstrong, Karen, *The Great Transformation*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2006, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Indeed, sometime during the 8th Century B.C.E., Tvashtri's fluttering ideas began roosting again in India, and people began renouncing their violent ways and sought, instead, to live the *brahmacharya*, the "holy life." Instead of greedily competing against others for survival, they gave up all their wealth and property, begged for food, and some even went naked, in order to contemplate life's truth and meaning. Part of this search included spending twelve years as a *brahmacharin*, one who studies at the feet of a teacher. Indeed, the word *Upanishads* means, "to sit down near to."¹¹ Religion in India was no longer about controlling the forces of nature, but about searching for ultimate truth and meaning by exploring one's own nature.

The greatest Hindu god, *Prajapati*, representing the highest reality, was, as Karen Armstrong explains, "no longer the lofty creator god but had become an ordinary guru, who taught his pupils that they must not regard him—Prajapati—as the highest reality, but seek their own atman,"¹²—their own truth and meaning. More importantly, even Indra eventually leaves his life of violence behind and comes to sit at the feet of Prajapati to contemplate deeper meaning. "Indra, a god who never stopped boasting of his exploits," Armstrong says, "had to gather wood for his teacher, look after his fire, clean Prajapati's house, be chaste, give up warfare, and practice *ahimsa*"¹³—nonviolence.

This myth, and the history of India, and the life of Gandhi, gives me hope that the idea of nonviolence, the recessive *ahimsa* meme, has not been, and cannot be destroyed. It keeps showing up in our world. Like the radiance and peaceful doves that fly forth from Tvashtri's decapitated body, the meme of peace, and compassion, and justice cannot be destroyed; and, so long as there are those committed to living and promoting these ideas, it may one day become the dominant meme in our culture and in our world.

So, in closing, let me just state explicitly what I've been getting at all along. What we think is important. Our ideas are important. And expressing our really good ideas can be of the utmost importance, because they can shape and transform our culture. This is why the Faux News's and the Rush Limbaugh's of the world exist, because the powers-that-be understand they must control the free-flow of ideas if they are to maintain the status quo. Yet look how powerful is the idea of nonviolence. Gandhi, without one strike, forced the British to leave his country! Martin Luther King, without one strike, established Civil Rights, and his idea of equality spread so fast and became so powerful, that within a single generation we have seen the end of segregation and elected a President of African American descent. What we do matters more than what we think, but what we think does matter, and having the courage to say what we think may matter most of all.

¹¹ Armstrong, *ibid.* p. 127.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 136.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 138.