

# Why Stickiness is not Enough to Explain Persistence of Counterintuitive Religious Concepts

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## Abstract

Cognitive scientists of religion argue that religious ideas are widespread because they are minimally counterintuitive. Traditional lab studies have found support for a better memory for minimally counterintuitive concepts. This paper presents an in-depth case study of the spread of a counterintuitive religious idea in the real world. It finds that counterintuitiveness alone is not sufficient to guarantee persistence of a religious belief. Novel religious beliefs have to be painstakingly woven into the cultural fabric of a group's shared social identity to ensure its survival.

**Keywords:** memory for counterintuitive concepts, cognitive anthropology of new religious movements,

## Introduction

According to a 2012 Pew Survey, 77% of South Asian Muslims believe in jinns (genies), 35% believe in witchcraft and 55% consult spiritual healers while 26% use talisman prescribe by such healers to cure or ward off different diseases or evil spirits (PewGlobal, 2012). Another Pew Survey found that 29% Americans have felt that they were in touch with a dead person while 18% believe that they have seen a ghost (PewForum, 2012). Why do people hold such counterintuitive religious beliefs? Cognitive scientists of religion argue that to explain spread of cultural ideas, we need to focus on transmission advantages that these ideas have over other types of ideas (Whitehouse & McCauley, 2005). Boyer (Boyer, 1994, 2001) hypothesized that ideas that are minimally counterintuitive i.e., concepts that violate only a small number of intuitive expectations (e.g., talking tree) for some people are remembered better than intuitive concepts (such as a green tree) and maximally counterintuitive concepts (such as a glowing tree that talks and disappears on Fridays) by those individuals. A number of in-lab studies using, mostly artificially designed short stories (such as the story of an alien visiting an alien museum), have found that people better remember minimally counterintuitive ideas (J. Barrett & Nyhof, 2001; Boyer & Ramble, 2001; Gonce, Upal, Slone, & Tweney, 2006; Upal, 2005; Upal, Gonce, Tweney, & Slone, 2007). On the basis of such evidence, cognitive scientists of religion have argued that counterintuitiveness can explain the spread of religious ideas (Whitehouse & McCauley, 2005). Some cultural anthropologists (Bloch, 2005) studying religious beliefs of real world groups have argued that counterintuitiveness, and the memorability advantages it confers, cannot fully explain differences in spread of religious ideas and that other contextual factors are needed to explain the spread of religious beliefs around the world.

To date, there has been little work done to investigate the key contextual factors and their interactions with counterintuitiveness. This paper reports on a detailed case study carried out to investigate the spread of a counterintuitive religious idea in the real world to identify socio-cognitive variables and processes involved.

## Context & Counterintuitiveness

Traditionally, some cognitive scientists of religion have argued that content of a concept alone determines whether a concept is counterintuitive and therefore memorable and that contextual factors can be ignored. The idea being that this would allow the new cognitive approach to explain the success of religious concepts in a group regardless of the particular historical or social forces acting on that group. Thus speaking about "schemas and scripts" that are "culturally variable," Barrett and Nyhoff (2001) argued that they "will not provide an explanation for cross-culturally prevalent classes of concepts." This conventional *content-based* view (J. Barrett & Nyhof, 2001; J. L. Barrett, 2008) downplays the role played by context and assumes that for concepts relevant to cognitive science of religion, conceptual processing is invariant to different contextual conditions. The *context-based* view (Upal, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2011a, 2011b), on the other hand, argues that a concept can only be counterintuitive in a specific context for a specific individual at a specific time. Upal defined the context for an individual as contents of the relevant parts of the semantic memory of the individual processing the concept, individual's motivation for processing the concept, and resources (e.g., time, brain capacity) available to the individual when processing the concept.

Upal (2010; 2011) also argued that in order to explain the success of a concept in a group, we need to look at group contextual factors. These include the shared mental representations of the group relevant to the concept. Upal also defined *socially counterintuitive ideas* as those ideas that violate shared mental representations of a group and argued that ideas that are socially counterintuitive for a group should have transmission advantages in that group. Thus the notion of "a plane flying people through the air" may have been socially counterintuitive for Melanesian tribes in the early twentieth century. Attempts at making sense of such counterintuitive ideas may have played a part in the formation of cargo cult ideologies in Melanesia (Whitehouse, 1995). To date, little work has been done to understand how socially counterintuitive concepts interact

with other socio-cognitive factors in the real world. Understanding these interactions is crucial if we want to understand how religious ideas spread in the real world.

### **Case Study of the Real World Spread of A Counterintuitive Religious Idea**

In order to understand the relative contributions of various sociocognitive factors to the spread of counterintuitive ideas, it would be nice if we had multiple versions of a counterintuitive idea that were planted in different groups with slightly different socio-cognitive characteristics with the idea spreading in some groups but not others. Of course, finding such instances in the real world is extremely difficult. For the case study reported here, we selected two different versions of an idea that was socially counterintuitive for nineteenth century South Asian Muslims. A century and half later, one of these versions is deeply lodged in the minds of a large number of South Asian Muslims while the other version is barely remembered by a few. We will carefully examine the two versions of the idea and the sociocognitive characteristics of their target population to identify factors that led to differences in their spread.

#### **A Socially Counterintuitive Idea for 19<sup>th</sup> Century South Asian Muslims**

The nineteenth century South Asian Muslims, similar to Muslims elsewhere in the world (then and now), did not believe in Jesus's crucifixion. Instead they believed that Jesus had been saved the disgrace of death-by-hanging by a last minute intervention by God. God raised Jesus to the heavens and made someone else look like him. Romans then hanged the lookalike taking him for real Jesus. The real Jesus sits on the right hand of God awaiting his return at the end of times as a Muslim (Reynolds, 2009). Thus Indian Muslims found the claims that Jesus had died a natural death and was not sitting on God's right hand to be counterintuitive and surprising. Such claims were made roughly around 1890 by two Indian Muslims Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908).

#### **Sir Syed Ahmad Khan**

Syed Ahmad Khan (Metcalf, 1982) was born into a Mughal family in Delhi, the seat of the Mughal empire that had ruled India since the sixteenth century. At a young age of twenty five, he was awarded the highly sought after nobility titles of *Javad-ud Daulah* and *Arif-Jang* by the last Mughal King Bahadur Shah Zafar. Recognizing the growing power of the British East India Company, he joined the company as a jurist and played a significant role in fighting the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The British government recognized his services by awarding him the Order of the Star of India in 1868, and Knighthood in 1888. He was also awarded an honorary doctorate by Edinburgh University in 1890.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan felt that the main reason for the dominance of Western nations during the nineteenth century was rational thinking and resulting scientific and technological advances. Khan became an advocate for incorporation of Western values of rationality and education into Indian Muslim thought. He criticized traditional Muslim ulema for preaching Muslims against the adoption of Western values and education. He raised funds to open school and colleges for Muslims throughout India where they would be taught traditional Islamic subjects as well as Western subjects of philosophy and science. Khan opened the Mohamadan Anglo-Indian College in Aligarh in 1870 and dreamed of making it the Oxford University of India.

Khan also argued for reforming Islam to free it of irrational beliefs and practices such as the belief in supernatural miracles by arguing that God does not violate his own laws of nature. In particular he argued that Jesus' physical ascension to heaven violated God's own law that human beings are not raised to heaven alive. Thus he argued that the belief in Jesus's physical ascension was not rational. He said:

The Quran makes mention of Jesus' death in four places... Firstly in Sura Aal Imran, secondly in Sura Ma'ida, ... thirdly in Sura Maryam... fourthly in Sura Nisa'. Jesus was not killed by the Jews, either by stoning or by crucifixion, but he died his natural death, and God raised him in rank and status... From the first three verses it is clear that Jesus died a natural death."

(Khan 1880; p. 48)

Khan was very well known in his day and he was successful in improving the relationship between Indian Muslims and the British government. His educational achievements are remembered by Muslims throughout South Asia. The MAO college founded by him in Aligarh grew into a thriving world class Aligarh University. However, other than a few scholars and historians, almost no one knows that he argued against Jesus's physical ascension and that he claimed that Jesus had died a natural death here on earth.

#### **Mirza Ghulam Ahmad**

Similar to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was the son of a Mughal noble but of a much lesser rank (Friedman, 1992; Lavan, 1974). Ahmad's family lived far from the center of Mughal power in a small village of Qadian in Punjab (Dard, 1948). To make matters worse, the family lost much of its feudal lands during the Sikh rule. While the East India Company's defeat of the Sikhs in 1853 was seen as a positive sign by Ahmad and his family, the growing activities of Christian missionaries were considered an unwelcome assault against Islam by Ahmad, his family, and indeed most Punjabi Muslims. Ahmad never went to school and was home schooled in Islamic arts of Quran, Hadith, and Fiqah. Besides a brief stint as a clerk, he never

held a job and spent most of his life sequestered in the village mosque dependent on the charity of his older brother and friends.

Unlike Khan, Ahmad argued that the reason for Muslim decline was that they had moved away from Islam and that in order to restore their lost glory, they needed to go back to following Islam more faithfully. Ahmad was concerned with increasing number of Punjabi Muslim peasants who were converting to Christianity. Ahmad argued that Christian missionaries were tricking simple Punjabi Muslims by reminding them that according to their own Islamic beliefs, Jesus was alive in the heavens above and Muhammad was buried six feet underground, thus proving Jesus's superiority over Muhammad. He said that the only way to blunt this argument was to change Muslims beliefs regarding Jesus to convince them that Jesus was also dead and buried. Unlike Khan, who made Western notion of rationality as the reason for the change, Ahmad argued that Jesus had to die to restore Islam's superiority over Christianity. Ahmad said:

To believe that Jesus is alive, is highly insulting and derogatory to the Holy Prophet. I cannot stand this sacrilege even for a moment. Everyone knows that the Holy Prophet passed away at the age of sixty-three and lies buried in his tomb at Medina, which millions of pilgrims visit every year. If it is disrespectful to believe in the death of Jesus or even to think of it, then I ask how can you permit this insolence and disrespect with regard to the Holy Prophet? Indeed, you so brazenly announce his demise. Your ceremonial singers recount the events preceding the demise of the Holy Prophet, and you readily admit even to the non-believers that he did die. But I wonder what hits you so hard at the mere mention of the death of Jesus that it fills you with uncontrollable rage. I would not have been so hurt if you had also shed tears at the death of the Holy Prophet. But it is such as pity that you gladly accept the death of him who was the Seal of the prophets and the lord and master of us all, but consider Jesus to be alive who pronounced himself unworthy even to loosen the shoe-laces of the Holy Prophet? In fact, it would be of little wonder if the Holy Prophet, peace be upon him, were still alive, as it was he who brought the Supreme Guidance, the equal of which is not to be found in the world. He demonstrated in his person all the possible spiritual excellences, the equal and like of which cannot be witnessed even if we trace history back to

Adam. The truth of the matter is that the Muslims, as indeed the entire world, needed the Holy Prophet, peace be upon him, alive far more than it did Jesus... how can one claim to love and be a follower of the Holy Prophet if he accepts a superior status for Jesus by pronouncing him alive and the Holy Prophet dead?

(Ahmad, 1905) (p. 16-17)

Furthermore, Ahmad argued that Muslims in Islam's golden period had believed in Jesus's death. Afterwards, as Christian ideas slowly crept into Islam God withdrew his favors. Note that this process of a heavenly message being slowly corrupted is precisely the same process through which Muslims believe that Jesus and Moses' teachings had been corrupted by the Christians and Jews over time. Ahmed merely extended the same process to the Islamic belief regarding Jesus. Ahmad argued that going back to our original beliefs would result in restoration of the past glory. Social psychologists have found that this arcing pattern of narrative to be highly successful in causing social change especially among high ingroup identifiers who are usually resistant to all messages of social change.

To really blunt the evangelical argument who pointed to Muhammad's tomb as a proof of his lower status, Ahmed wanted a physical symbol of Jesus' death, preferably a tomb. It appears that he turned to Christian sources regarding Jesus which mention a grave in the holy land where Jesus laid for three days before he was raised. Even though the exact location of the tomb was unclear to him, Ahmed used the existence of Jesus' grave in the holy land as evidence supporting his conviction that Jesus had died a natural death in his arguments with Christians. Writing to respond to Siraj-ud-Din, the Christian, he wrote, "Off course it is true that Jesus died in Galilee but it is not true that his body was resurrected" (Ahmad, 1891). He later wrote to a Syrian acquaintance inquiring about the exact co-ordinates of the tomb. When told that it was nearby, he assumed that it was in Syria. He wrote, "the funny thing is that there is a tomb of Jesus in the country of Syria. For further clarity regarding this matter I quote the witness of brother Syed Muhammad Al-saeedi Tarablassi who lives in Tarablas, Syria... If you were to argue that the tomb is fake then you would have to prove your argument. You would also have to show when the fakery were invented? If Jesus' tomb is proved fake we would also become suspicious about the tombs of other prophets and lose our belief in their authenticity. We would have to admit that perhaps those tombs are also fake3" (Ahmad, 1894).

To demonstrate his credibility to those Muslims who doubted his intentions, Ahmad had to emphasize his love for Muhammad and the strength of his belief in Muhammad's superiority over all other prophets. Part of this strategy implied that when Muslims perceived a slight against the Holy Prophet by non-Muslims, Ahmad and his successors had to take the lead in expressing their disgust. Upon

hearing of some perceived insult against Muhammad, Ahmad wrote,

The hurtful words which these opponents have used against the best of creation, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, has injured my heart. I swear by God that if all my children, and the children of my children, all of my friends, and all of my helpers were murdered before my eyes, and my hands and feet were cut off, and if my eyes were taken out, and if I was deprived of all my ambitions, and were to have lost all my happiness and comforts, in comparison to all these things, that grief is far greater to me when such filthy attacks are made against the pure person of the Holy Prophet.

(Ahmad, 1893)(p 15)

What Ahmad lacked in formal education, a well paying government job, or urban connections, he made up through his passion for defending Islam in public debates with Christian evangelists and Hindu revivalist preachers that traveled throughout rural Punjab in the nineteenth century. Still, even at the peak of his career, he was never as well known or influential as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Despite these shortcomings, which we know have an impact on the extent to which the message is spread, Ahmad was far more successful than Khan in propagating the idea of Jesus's death among South Asian Muslims. Today Ahmad's adherents number in millions and many more South Asian Muslims associate the idea of Jesus dying a natural death with Ahmad than with Khan. Why did that happen? What sociocognitive factors made Ahmad's message more powerful than Khan's message?

### Comparison of the two version of the idea

If we compare the messages denying Jesus's physical ascension to heaven composed by Ahmad and Khan, we notice similarities and differences between the two messages. Both authors invoked traditional Islamic sources of authority, namely, Quran and Hadith in support of their claims thus arguing that it had been the original Islamic belief. Both wrote books and pamphlets in Urdu, the language spoken by many South Asian Muslims, especially in North and Central India, to justify their counterintuitive messages. There were, however, also significant differences in the way the two constructed their justifications for why they were making the claims that violated shared beliefs of so many South Asian Muslims. Khan explained that the beliefs about Jesus had to be changed because they violated God's natural law and that it's illogical to believe that God violates his own laws. He argued that holding such illogical beliefs was holding Muslims back from making scientific and technological gains that would propel Muslims into the modern age. Ahmad, on the other hand, argued that beliefs about Jesus were the cause of ingroup defeat at the hands of evangelical Christianity and that a change in belief will

reverse the fortunes of ingroup members at the expense of the outgroup.

South Asian Muslims may have been reluctant to accept Khan's message because notions of logic and rationality were more closely associated with the outgroup in their minds. Social identity theory tells us that social groups do not like to compare themselves with other groups on dimensions on which they do not look good. Since, they did not believe that they could become more logical and rational than the British outgroup, Khan's message did not appeal to them. Ahmad's narrative of "Muslims lost because they weren't religious enough" was also supported by most other Muslims thinkers and that versions came to dominate Muslim thinking throughout twentieth century (Lewis, 2003). Muslims believed that they fare well when they compare themselves to the British on religiosity. Therefore, a message based on religiosity had more appeal for them.

### Conclusions

Traditional cognitive science of religion accounts have claimed that counterintuitiveness of an idea, regardless of the context, can explain cultural success of religious ideas. These notions have found some support in in-lab studies using artificially designed stories. This paper presents an in-depth study of the spread of a counterintuitive religious idea. Detailed case studies, such as above, are crucial if we want to understand the spread of religious ideas in the real world. It shows that in order to achieve acceptance, counterintuitiveness of an idea has to be justified by invoking the shared beliefs on the group in question. Such justifications must resonate with their target audience in order to convince them to accept the new belief. Thus counterintuitiveness of an idea may be helpful in gaining people's attention but it is the manner of justifying the counterintuitiveness that plays a crucial role in deciding whether the concept becomes culturally accepted or not.

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