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### Surrealist Meme Subculture: Two Paths on Religion

In this essay, I shall strive for a definition of religion that spans across multiple intellectuals in the field of religious studies; however, my definition will consist of three points that take a fundamentalist and sociobiological perspective. First, that religion is a social system that contributes to the survivability of the in-group through providing a way to keep on living in this harsh world, either through hope or through inebriation; in this I will contrast Burkert and Marx). Secondly, religion structurally postulates an in-group and out-group through a revelation of the true way to live, or achieve Plato's eudaimonia, Lastly, it contributes to the survivability of the group by enforcing group values and enhanced dedication through worship of the group through specific totems, which stems from Durkheim's ideas. Surrealist meme subculture can be productively understood as if it were a religion.

As much as memes have been appropriated into the realm of internet "funnies", the concept of memes arose from the sociobiological theory of memetics. Memetics is a field of sociobiology pioneered by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. The core idea is that memes are "units of culture that self-replicate with a life of their own" through mimicry and remix, including ideas such as stories, songs, habits, skills, inventions, and perhaps even religion itself (Poulshock). However, memes have come to define a humorous image, video, or text that spreads virally in nature, and is widely remixed into other renditions of the same humor. Just as the first humans emerged out of Africa, the first memes emerged out of the anonymous image-board social media site 4chan. They usually were a funny or thematically relevant image accompanied by "macro style" font captions. Memes can also come in video formats, such as the meme inside-joke of playing Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up" as a form of irony, dubbed as "rickrolling."



Figure 1. Meme with Macro Style Font Captions

However, as memes took over the internet, more specific communities of meme sub-cultures came into existence on the online website Reddit, including cultures such as r/DankMemes, r/DeepFriedMemes, and r/SurrealMemes. Dank memes focus on representing irony, while deep fried memes overlay images with multiple filters to make it appear “grainy, washed-out, and strangely colored” (Know your meme).



Figure 2. Dank Meme about Mark Zuckerberg



Figure 3. Deep Fried Filter Applied to Laughing-Crying Face Emoji

The focus of this essay will be on the r/SurrealistMemes community, as well as the wider canon of surrealist memes. Internet Meme database Know Your Meme alternatively defines it as “a sub-genre of Ironic Memes that are artistically bizarre in appearance and whose humor derives from their absurd style.” Common motifs in surreal memes includes the phrase “Layers of Irony”, the character Meme Man, and the character Orang Min.



Figure 4. Meme Man

Figure 5. Orang Min

If you have never seen surrealist memes before, I’m guessing that you have one question on your mind: how on earth is this funny? But that’s exactly the point. Surrealist meme humor is a play on the ideas of cohesion and individuality, in which you must remix popular and familiar motifs in continually unique ways. Hence, “you can only judge the amount of cohesion to surrealism and uniqueness to normies if you regularly consume surreal memes” (Gilliland). The only way to truly understand why surrealist memes are funny would be to continuously expose yourself to enough of them that you understand what is cohesive enough to the group’s identity, and what is just unique enough of a remix that it stands out as a relevant development to the subculture.



Figure 6. A Surreal Meme

One example is the meme above. The substance of this meme is just: air moves. The meme itself doesn’t really have content that is typically humorous, smart, or ironic. But what is funny has a lot to do with its linguistic and aesthetic expression. “Commit motion” is used over

“moves”, which is funny in the community because the word “commit” is commonly used to describe things that weren’t ultimately “committed.” This application of the word “commit” to “motion” is fresh and funny, while adherent to the trend of using “commit” where it does not logically belong. Popular aesthetic motifs such as the Meme Man, laser eyes, disembodied hands, and hands on head images are all used in this meme. However, what’s funny is how these motifs are edited together to form a cohesive image, creating a unique remix of recurring images.

This is actually relatively Platonic. In Plato’s *The Republic*, he frames his revelation that there is a “true way to live”, also known as eudaimonia. The eye was created to see, and the bird was created to fly. As a result, everything on this earth was born for a purpose. A human’s would be eudaimonia, or a higher human good that brings as much clarity as the sun brings light to our world. Each person can get closer to achieving this through following the kalokagathia, or a path of liberal education involving truth-seeking in mathematics, reasoning, and ethics. While Plato is not perceived as a religion by modern standards, some of what he does is religious. He clearly postulates a universal truth (achieving eudaimonia) about our universe, and delineates a way to achieve it (kalokagathia). Surrealist meme subculture does this too. It doesn’t postulate the “true way to live” but rather the “true way to be funny on the internet”, and you can only access this mindset if you follow a set path of regularly consuming surrealist memes. But not every fellow that goes around postulating “the true way to live” is a religious leader, or we’d have as many religious leaders as we had self-help books. One person believing it alone doesn’t form a religion, it forms an individual belief. A community has to gather and share the belief.

But surrealist meme subculture has managed to garner a group of people that frequently consume surrealist memes, and “believe” that they are funny. I would argue that this is achieved through the repetition of certain artistic motifs that function as totems, echoing Durkheim’s theory on totems reinforcing the survivability of the in-group. Durkheim’s perspective was that society is a set of “laws, customs, ideas, values, traditions, techniques, and products” that are external to the human individual and mind (Pals). The worship of totems in the most basic religions are simply a set of customs applied to the product. To him, there is no inherent spirituality to the totem, it doesn’t truly represent a mythological or spiritual figure. Instead, it is a representation of a group. To worship the totem is to worship the group. To elucidate this, I will first describe the Reddit meme thread r/WholesomeMemes. Wholesome memes use direct references to pop culture and make humor out of common human experiences that incite joy,

happiness, and other positive emotions. There are no “totems” in wholesome memes as the images are simply shared by wider pop culture, and have no boundaries to enter. Although there are more active contributors to the Reddit thread, there is no “wholesome memes subculture”—because they are so readily accessible and hold no totems, there is no group identity that would warrant it being classified as a subculture.

this hedgehog is cheering for u bc u can do anything



Figure 7. A wholesome meme

As can be seen from the wholesome meme above, the cuteness of the hedgehog and the encouraging message is easily uplifting to a wide audience, but also has less of a distinct identity. There is no sense of “sacred” versus “profane” in wholesome memes because there is no distinct “us” to contrast against “them.” However, this does exist in the surrealist meme community.

**Don't Drink Water**  
**After Eating Fish**

 A photograph of a fish, likely a red snapper, oriented horizontally. The most striking feature is a large, intricate grid pattern covering its entire body, from head to tail. The fish is set against a plain, light-colored background. Below the image is a caption in bold black text.
 

**B'coz the Water May Cause the Fish  
to Swim and then u will Feel gulugulu  
gulugulu in ur Stomach**

↳ [-] [FlamesEmoji](#) 62 points 9 months ago  
NOT SURREAL. DISQUALIFIED.  
[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#)

↳ [-] [chagas\\_disease](#) 31 points 9 months ago

↳ [-] [NOR>m {ie}](#)  
[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#)

↳ [-] [QueenCharla](#) 27 points 9 months ago  
This is the least surreal meme I've ever seen in my life  
[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#)

↳ [-] [enmes](#) 20 points 9 months ago  
Oh, when a still image becomes elderly enough to accumulate dust in the back of my mind, I do not feel entertained in seeing it multiple times.  
[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#)

Figure 8. A “normie” meme that fails to be surreal enough

In the above figure, we observe a meme posted to r/SurrealMemes that was dubbed “not surreal enough” because it did not remix enough commonly used surrealist motifs or totems (such as Meme Man or Orang Min)—in short, it did not worship the group enough. Hence, it was declared as “least surreal”, unentertaining. Lastly, Reddit user chagas\_disease dubs it with the derogatory term “normie.” “Normie” refers to “normal”, or the opposite of the identity of surrealist meme subculture. Normie is normal, mainstream, and what wholesome memes represent. Hence, there is a clear delineation between “us” and “normies” (“them”) as sacred and profane. This “us vs normies” mentality puts pressure on members of the group to continually remix and reference surrealist totems, which is a form of self-worship. It protects the in-group from being absorbed by wider pop-culture, which would then break down the tight-knit community that has been developed. But why have people gathered around surreal memes? Why has surrealist online humor caught the attention of online youth, and why does it have the power for them to form religious-adjacent communities?

There are two theories for how surrealist memes, specifically, contribute to giving a heightened sense of hope and artistic purpose, one proposed by Geneiveve Gilliland in her Master’s thesis to the University of Tennessee, and second by Washington Post writer Allison Bruenig. Gilliland theorizes that it has to do with the rising pervasiveness of social media. As social media puts pressure on modern youth to be ever-present—showing more of their lives on social media, as well as interacting more with their friend’s lives, social media becomes everywhere. Pervasive. Hence, the nonsensical element of surrealist memes acts as a cathartic foil to social media. Resisting the pressure to constantly make shareable meaning of our lives, they instead engage with the surrealist memes online community. The surrealist memes online community is so thoroughly dedicated to making absolutely no sense at all that it is the polar opposite. Here, online youths can choose nonsense and surreality, liberated from the pressure of creating a specially curated hyper-reality.

The second theory would be proposed by Washington Post writer Allison Bruenig. She theorized that there is a rise of nihilism in this generation that comes hand in hand with the erosion of many traditional moral systems (dissatisfaction with religion, the traditional family unit, job market, politics) as well as the reckoning that many of them have been built on morally reprehensible structures (racism, bigotry, sexism, homophobia). Surrealist memes, often using a dark, inhuman tone, as well as outer space-adjacent settings, as well as a cluttered and eccentric

Dadaist art style. These elements often represent chaos, nonsense, a “darker” feeling, either as an expressive protest against the highly curated image of social media or an expression of the inner “empty” existential dread that they feel with the rise of nihilism. In her words, “In this weird world of the surreal and bizarre, horror mingles with humor, and young people have space to play with emotions that seem more and more to proceed from ordinary life—the creeping suspicion that the world just doesn’t make sense.” There is a growing nihilism in modern internet culture, either from the breakdown of traditional value systems, or from the over-pervasiveness of social media. Marx would argue that this nihilism is a byproduct of capitalism.



Figure 9. Karl Marx

Marx’s economic perspective divided the world between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, with the proletariat as oppressed by the bourgeoisie into demoralizing industrial labor. To keep the proletariat motivated and submissive, the bourgeoisie used religion as a metaphorical “opioid” to artificially convince the proletariat that they aren’t being oppressed, and that they can continue existing in the capitalist system. He theorized that as people eventually realized their oppression and moved closer to economic liberation, they will discard religion and no longer need them. Cynically, he logically concluded that all of the bourgeois were simply consciously pretending that religion was real in order to keep the proletariat subjugated to the industrial system. We can apply Marx to our two theories on the surrealist meme community. If Marx had Reddit, he would probably argue that this nihilism is a byproduct of the proletariat realizing their oppression, and emptiness that fuels the revolution that will lead us to a communist paradise. Hence, surrealist memes are an “opioid” to numb this feeling.

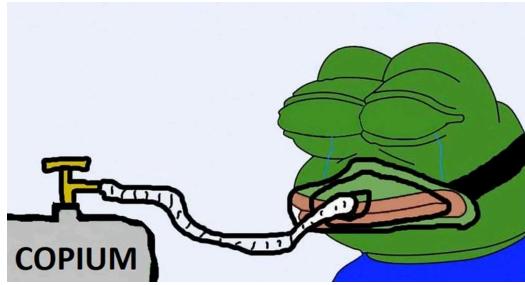


Figure 10. “Religion is the opioid of the people” / “Surrealist memes are the copiod of the millennials”

[These are actually “gamer memes” as they originated from the gaming community, not surreal memes. They are used only for the pun on the subject matter.]

However, this argument doesn’t fit perfectly. Surrealist memes are wholly divorced from the systems of money. Because of the anonymous nature of surrealist meme online communities, anyone is able to gain social currency within the community through being surreally humorous; it’s something that is uncontrollable by the bourgeois. People in power and with money are all of the older generations, while surreal memes are helmed by an overwhelmingly youthful demographic. Furthermore, they aren’t simply an opioid to numb the feeling of nihilism. Instead, they are an expression of nihilism.

To answer this, I would turn to Burkert’s theory on sociobiology. Burkert observed the commonalities throughout all human civilizations—we all breathed, ate food, and defecated. But secondary to those immediate needs, humans also developed art, music, and dance. Life is simply the set number of years in which a human being remains alive, and it is full of bleak suffering in death, starvation, sickness, and other ailments. Hence, Burkert theorized that art, music, and dance emerged as a biological adaptation to keep humans mentally motivated to keep themselves alive, to take care of their bodies and search for food. It does so by instilling hope, or positive feelings of joy. Religion is either an addition to this list, or even something that instills a higher sense of hope due to a spirituality, or an enhanced group mindset. Surrealist memes fit better into this mold because they are an engaging, creative activity that express the feelings of nihilism. Through creativity, they can add a personal touch that keeps them more personally invested. But as social media breaks down boundaries and creates a space for people to connect over surrealist humor and art in a more intimate way than before, offering the enhanced connectivity and universality that spirituality formerly offered. In a sense, anything can “numb” the growing pains of our capitalistic society, but to reduce surrealist memes to just an opioid is a

reduction of the raw creativity that comes from the artistic and humorous expression of nihilism—this is what gives it power. People use opioids in isolation; people create hope together.



Figure 10. Hope

[These are actually gamer memes, not surreal memes. They are used for the pun on the subject matter but do not classify as surreal memes]

Religions fundamentally postulate a “way things *really* are” and “the *true* way to live”. Surrealist memes are not religions because they postulate “the *true* way to be funny” on the internet, something more trivial than the all-encompassing truth of our reality. And yet, they have developed social patterns that are analogous to religious groups such as totemic worship, in-group out-group mentality, and the provision of hope—all without spiritual faith or belief. That means that none of those social patterns are inherently tied to spirituality or belief in a higher power. After all, they have also developed around trivial, nonsensical internet memes. This doesn’t have to be a reductive point of view: maybe the Jews were right all along about Yahweh, maybe Plato was right all along about one universal truth, and maybe Nietzsche was right all along that there is no truth. Regardless, we have imposed our exclusively human tendency towards group survivability onto religions.

On the flip side of this, it also means that we can latch on to creative, trivial, and diverse things to ensure group survivability without the need for a spiritual twist. Young people grow more and more disillusioned with traditional models of religion, with a rise of the percentage of people associating with unaffiliated religion growing from 16% to 29% in the past 14 years. There is growing evidence to support that people are gravitating towards being religiously unaffiliated, but spiritual. Known as the “spiritual but not religious”, people increasingly seek connection to spirituality without being affiliated to organized religion, with 27% of Americans associating as “spiritual but not religious.”

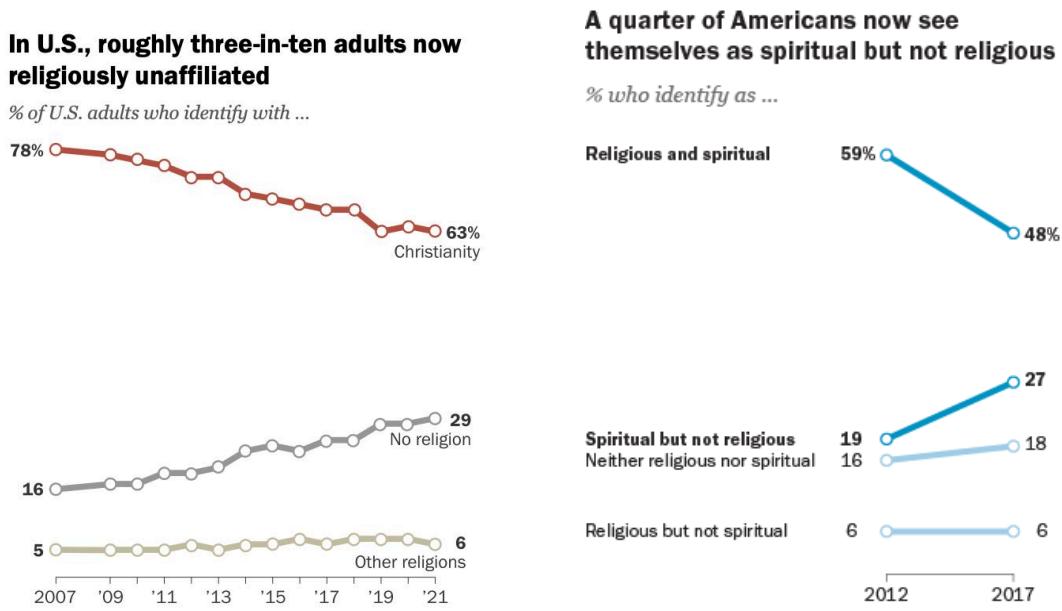


Figure 11. American population on religious Affiliation

Figure 12: American population on “spiritual” and “religious”

Either way, there is a clear vacuum that perhaps will be filled by technology, mass communication, and internet social networks that provide similar services to religion but will not really seem like the religion we know of. Before technology, religion was the way to feel connected to something greater than yourself, or your direct community. However, as social media builds bridges and across all walks of life, perhaps the wealth of connectivity on the platform will offer the services that religion used to offer, and spiritual beliefs will become less organized, and more individualistic. This presents the first path of reasoning: group survivability defines religion; and hence, sociobiology must be used to understand religion. Or: spirituality defines religion; and hence, sociobiology has always been a separate phenomenon. We could simply choose a path. Or, we could turn to the way human networks form on the internet in comparison to modern organized religions for more answers.

*“The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him---you and I. All of us are his murderers... How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?” - Nietzsche*

*Memes. We comfort ourselves with memes.*

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