

The Ideology Is Not The Movement

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I

Why is there such a strong Sunni/Shia divide?

I know the Comparative Religion 101 answer. The early Muslims were debating who was the rightful caliph. Some of them said Abu Bakr, others said Ali, and the dispute has been going on ever since. On the other hand, that was fourteen hundred years ago, both candidates are long dead, and there's no more caliphate. You'd think maybe they'd let the matter rest.

Sure, the two groups have slightly different hadith and schools of jurisprudence, but how many Muslims even *know* which school of jurisprudence they're supposed to be following? It seems like a pretty minor thing to have centuries of animus over.

And so we return again to [Robbers' Cave](#):

The experimental subjects — excuse me, “campers” — were 22 boys between 5th and 6th grade, selected from 22 different schools in Oklahoma City, of stable middle-class

Protestant families, doing well in school, median IQ 112. They were as well-adjusted and as similar to each other as the researchers could manage.

The experiment, conducted in the bewildered aftermath of World War II, was meant to investigate the causes—and possible remedies—of intergroup conflict. How would they spark an intergroup conflict to investigate? Well, the 22 boys were divided into two groups of 11 campers, and —

— and that turned out to be quite sufficient.

The researchers' original plans called for the experiment to be conducted in three stages. In Stage 1, each group of campers would settle in, unaware of the other group's existence. Toward the end of Stage 1, the groups would gradually be made aware of each other. In Stage 2, a set of contests and prize competitions would set the two groups at odds.

They needn't have bothered with Stage 2. There was hostility almost from the moment each group became aware of the other group's existence: They were using our campground, our baseball diamond. On their first meeting, the two groups began hurling insults. They named themselves the Rattlers and the Eagles (they hadn't needed names when they were the only group on the campground).

When the contests and prizes were announced, in accordance with pre-established experimental procedure, the intergroup rivalry rose to a fever pitch. Good sportsmanship in the contests was evident for the first two days but rapidly disintegrated.

The Eagles stole the Rattlers' flag and burned it. Rattlers raided the Eagles' cabin and stole the blue jeans of the group leader, which they painted orange and carried as a flag the next day, inscribed with the legend "The Last of the Eagles". The Eagles launched a retaliatory raid on the Rattlers, turning over beds, scattering dirt. Then they returned to their cabin where they entrenched and prepared weapons (socks filled with rocks) in case of a return raid. After the Eagles won the last contest planned for Stage 2, the Rattlers raided their cabin and stole the prizes. This developed into a fistfight that the staff had to shut down for fear of injury. The Eagles, retelling the tale among themselves, turned the whole affair into a magnificent victory—they'd chased the Rattlers "over halfway back to their cabin" (they hadn't).

Each group developed a negative stereotype of Them and a contrasting positive stereotype of Us. The Rattlers swore heavily. The Eagles, after winning one game, concluded that the Eagles had won because of their prayers and the Rattlers had lost because they used cuss-words all the time. The Eagles decided to stop using cuss-words themselves. They also concluded that since the Rattlers swore all the time, it would be wiser not to talk to them. The Eagles devel-

oped an image of themselves as proper-and-moral; the Rattlers developed an image of themselves as rough-and-tough.

If the researchers had decided that the real difference between the two groups was that the Eagles were adherents of Eagleism, which held cussing as absolutely taboo, and the Rattlers adherents of Rattlerism, which held it a holy duty to cuss five times a day – well, that strikes me as the best equivalent to saying that Sunni and Shia differ over the rightful caliph.



Nations, religions, cults, gangs, subcultures, fraternal societies, internet communities, political parties, social movements – these are all really different, but they also have some deep similarities. They're all groups of people. They all combine comradery within the group with a tendency to dislike other groups of the same type. They all tend to have a stated purpose, like electing a candidate or worshipping a deity, but also serve a very important role as impromptu social clubs whose members mostly interact with one another instead of outsiders. They all develop an internal culture such that members of the groups often like the same foods, wear the same clothing, play the same sports, and have the same philosophical beliefs as other members of the group – even when there are only tenuous links or no links at all to the stated purpose. They all tend to develop sort of legendary histories, where they celebrate and exaggerate the deeds of the groups' founders and past champions. And they all tend to inspire something like patriotism,

where people are proud of their group membership and express that pride through conspicuous use of group symbols, group songs, et cetera. For better or worse, the standard way to refer to this category of thing is “tribe”.

Tribalism is potentially present in all groups, but levels differ a lot even in groups of nominally the same type. Modern Belgium seems like an unusually non-tribal nation; Imperial Japan in World War II seems like an unusually tribal one. Neoliberalism and market socialism seem like unusually non-tribal political philosophies; communism and libertarianism seem like unusually tribal ones. Corporations with names like Amalgamated Products Co probably aren't very tribal; charismatic corporations like Apple that become identities for their employees and customers are more so. Cults are maybe the most tribal groups that exist in the modern world, and those Cult Screening Tools make good measures for tribalism as well.

The dangers of tribalism are obvious; for example, fascism is based around dialing a country's tribalism up to eleven, and it ends poorly. If I had written this essay five years ago, it would be titled “Why Tribalism Is Stupid And Needs To Be Destroyed”. Since then, I've changed my mind. I've found that [I enjoy being in tribes as much as anyone else.](#)

Part of this was resolving a major social fallacy I'd had throughout high school and college, which was that the correct way to make friends was to pick the five most interesting people I knew and try to befriend them. This almost never worked and I thought it meant

I had terrible social skills. Then I looked at what everyone else was doing, and I found that instead of isolated surgical strikes of friendship, they were forming groups. The band people. The mock trial people. The football team people. The Three Popular Girls Who Went Everywhere Together. Once I tried “falling in with” a group, friendship became much easier and self-sustaining precisely because of all of the tribal development that happens when a group of similar people all know each other and have a shared interest. Since then I’ve had good luck finding tribes I like and that accept me – the rationalists being the most obvious example, but even interacting with my coworkers on the same hospital unit at work is better than trying to find and cultivate random people.

Some benefits of tribalism are easy to explain. Tribalism intensifies all positive and prosocial feelings within the tribe. It increases trust within the tribe and allows otherwise-impossible forms of cooperation – remember Haidt on the [Jewish diamond merchants](#) out-competing their rivals because their mutual Judaism gave them a series of high-trust connections that saved them costly verification procedures? It gives people a support network they can rely on when their luck is bad and they need help. It lets you “be yourself” without worrying that this will be incomprehensible or offensive to somebody who thinks totally differently from you. It creates an instant densely-connected social network of people who mostly get along with one another. It makes people feel like part of something larger than themselves, which makes them happy and can ([probably](#)) improves their physical and mental health.

Others are more complicated. I can just make motions at a feeling that “what I do matters”, in the sense that I will probably never be a Beethoven or a Napoleon who is very important to the history of the world as a whole, but I can do things that are important within the context of a certain group of people. All of this is really good for my happiness and mental health. When people talk about how modern society is “atomized” or “lacks community” or “doesn’t have meaning”, I think they’re talking about a lack of tribalism, which leaves people all alone in the face of a society much too big to understand or affect. The evolutionary psychology angle here is too obvious to even be worth stating.

And others are entirely philosophical. I think some people would say that wanting to have a tribe is like wanting to have a family – part of what it means to be human – and demands to justify either are equally wrong-headed.

Eliezer thinks [every cause wants to be a cult](#). I would phrase this more neutrally as “every cause wants to be a tribe”. I’ve seen a lot of activities go through the following cycle:

1. Let’s get together to do X
2. Let’s get together to do X, and have drinks afterwards
3. Let’s get together to discuss things from an X-informed perspective
4. Let’s get together to discuss the sorts of things that interest people who do X

5. Let's get together to discuss how the sort of people who do X are much better than the sort of people who do Y.
6. [Dating site](#) for the sort of people who do X
7. Oh god, it was so annoying, she spent the whole date talking about X.
8. X? What X?

This can happen over anything or nothing at all. Despite the artificial nature of the Robbers' Cove experiment, its groups are easily recognized as tribes. Indeed, the reason this experiment is so interesting is that it shows tribes in their purest form; no veneer of really being about pushing a social change or supporting a caliph, just tribes for tribalism's sake.



Scholars call the process of creating a new tribe “ethnogenesis” – Robbers' Cave was artificially inducing ethnogenesis to see what would happen. My model of ethnogenesis involves four stages: pre-existing differences, a rallying flag, development, and dissolution.

Pre-existing differences are the raw materials out of which tribes are made. A good tribe combines people who have similar interests and styles of interaction *even before* the ethnogenesis event. Any description of these differences will necessarily involve stereotypes, but a lot of them should be hard to argue. For example,

atheists are often pretty similar to one another even before they deconvert from their religion and officially become atheists. They're usually nerdy, skeptical, rational, not very big on community or togetherness, sarcastic, well-educated. At the risk of going into touchier territory, they're pretty often white and male. You take a sample of a hundred equally religious churchgoers and pick out the ones who are *most like the sort of people who are atheists* even if all of them are 100% believers. But there's also something more than that. There are subtle habits of thought, not yet described by any word or sentence, which atheists are more likely to have than other people. It's part of the reason why atheists *need* atheism as a rallying flag instead of just starting the Skeptical Nerdy Male Club.

The rallying flag is the explicit purpose of the tribe. It's usually a belief, event, or activity that get people with that specific pre-existing difference together and excited. Often it brings previously latent differences into sharp relief. People meet around the rallying flag, encounter each other, and say "You seem like a kindred soul!" or "I thought I was the only one!" Usually it suggests some course of action, which provides the tribe with a purpose. For atheists, the rallying flag is not believing in God. Somebody says "Hey, I don't believe in God, if you also don't believe in God come over here and we'll hang out together and talk about how much religious people suck." All the atheists go over by the rallying flag and get very excited about meeting each other. It starts with "Wow, you hate church too?", moves on to "Really, you also like science fiction?", and ends up at "Wow, you have the same undefinable habits of thought that I do!"

Development is all of the processes by which the fledgling tribe gains its own culture and history. It's a turning-inward and strengthening-of-walls, which transforms it from 'A Group Of People Who Do Not Believe In God And Happen To Be In The Same Place' to 'The Atheist Tribe'. For example, atheists have symbols like that 'A' inside an atom. They have jokes and mascots like Russell's Teapot and the Invisible Pink Unicorn. They have their own set of heroes, both mythologized past heroes like Galileo and controversial-but-undeniably-important modern heroes like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. They have celebrities like P.Z. Myers and Hemant Mehta. They have universally-agreed-upon villains to be booed and hated, like televangelists or the Westboro Baptist Church. They have grievances, like all the times that atheists have been fired or picked on by religious people, and all the laws about pledging allegiance to one nation under God and so on. They have stereotypes about themselves – intelligent, helpful, passionate – and stereotypes about their outgroups – deluded, ignorant, bigoted.

Dissolution is optional. The point of the previous three steps is to build a "wall" between the tribe and the outside, a series of systematic differences that let everybody know which side they're on. If a tribe was never really that different from the surrounding population, stops caring that much about its rallying flag, and doesn't develop enough culture, then the wall fails and the members disperse into the surrounding population. The classic example is the assimilation of immigrant groups like Irish-Americans, but history is littered with failed communes, cults, and political movements. Atheism hasn't quite dissolved yet, but occasionally you see hints of the process. A lot of the comments around "Atheism Plus" cen-

tered around this idea of “Okay, talking about how there’s no God all the time has gotten boring, plus nobody interesting believes in God anymore anyway, so let’s become about social justice instead”. The parts of atheism who went along with that message mostly dissolved into the broader social justice community – there are a host of nominally atheist blogs that haven’t talked about anything except social justice in months. Other fragments of the atheist community dissolved into transhumanism, or libertarianism, or any of a number of other things. Although there’s still an atheist community, it no longer seems quite as vibrant and cohesive as it used to be.

We can check this four-stage model by applying it to the Sunni and Shia and seeing if it sticks.

I know very little about early Islam and am relying on sources that might be biased, so don’t declare a fatwa against me if I turn out to be wrong, but it looks like from the beginning there were big pre-existing differences between proto-Shia and proto-Sunni. A lot of Ali’s earliest supporters were original Muslims who had known Mohammed personally, and a lot of Abu Bakr’s earliest supporters were later Muslims high up in the Meccan/Medinan political establishment who’d converted only after it became convenient to do so. It’s really easy to imagine cultural, social, and personality differences between these two groups. Probably members in each group already knew one another pretty well, and already had ill feelings towards members of the other, without necessarily being able to draw the group borders clearly or put their exact differences into words. Maybe it was “those goody-goodies who are always going

on about how close to Mohammed they were but have no practical governing ability” versus “those sellouts who don’t really believe in Islam and just want to keep playing their political games”.

Then came the rallying flag: a political disagreement over the succession. One group called themselves “the party of Ali”, whose Arabic translation “Shiatu Ali” eventually ended up as just “Shia”. The other group won and called itself “the traditional orthodox group”, in Arabic “Sunni”. Instead of a vague sense of “I wonder whether that guy there is one of those goody-goodies always talking about Mohammed, or whether he’s a practical type interested in good governance”, people could just ask “Are you for Abu Bakr or Ali?” and later “Are you Sunni or Shia?” Also at some point, I’m not exactly sure how, most of the Sunni ended up in Arabia and most of the Shia ended up in Iraq and Iran, after which I think some pre-existing Iraqi/Iranian vs. Arab cultural differences got absorbed into the Sunni/Shia mix too.

Then came development. Both groups developed elaborate mythologies lionizing their founders. The Sunni got the history of the “rightly-guided caliphs”, the Shia exaggerated the first few imams to legendary proportions. They developed grievances against each other; according to Shia history, the Sunnis killed eleven of their twelve leaders, with the twelfth escaping only when God directly plucked him out of the world to serve as a future Messiah. They developed different schools of hadith interpretation and jurisprudence and debated the differences ad nauseum with each other for hundreds of years. A lot of Shia theology is in Farsi; Sunni theology is entirely in Arabic. Sunni clergy usually dress in white;

Shia clergy usually dress in black and green. Not all of these were deliberately done in opposition to one another; most were just a consequence of the two camps being walled off from one another and so allowed to develop cultures independently.

Obviously the split hasn't dissolved yet, but it's worth looking at similar splits that have. Catholicism vs. Protestantism is still a going concern in a few places like Ireland, but it's nowhere near the total wars of the 17th century or even the Know-Nothing-Parties of the 19th. Consider that Marco Rubio is Catholic, but nobody [except Salon](#) particularly worries about that or says that it will make him unsuitable to lead a party representing the interests of very evangelical Protestants. Heck, the same party was happy to nominate Mitt Romney, a Mormon, and praise him for his "Christian faith". Part of it is the subsumption of those differences into a larger conflict – most Christians acknowledge Christianity vs. atheism to be a bigger deal than interdenominational disputes these days – and part of it is that everyone of every religion is so influenced by secular American culture that the religions have been reduced to their rallying flags alone rather than being fully developed tribes at this point. American Sunni and Shia seem to be [well on their way to dissolving into each other](#) too.

IV

I want to discuss a couple of issues that I think make more sense once you understand the concept of tribes and rallying flags:

1. Disability

I used to be very confused by disabled people who insist on not wanting a “cure” for their condition. Deaf people and autistic people are the two classic examples, and sure enough we find articles like [Not All Deaf People Want To Be Cured](#) and [They Don't Want An Autism Cure](#). Autistic people can at least argue their minds work differently rather than worse, but being deaf seems to be a straight-out disadvantage: the hearing can do anything the deaf can, and can hear also. A hearing person can become deaf at any time just by wearing earplugs, but a deaf person can't become hearing, at least not without very complicated high-tech surgeries.

When I asked some deaf friends about this, they explained that they had a really close-knit and supportive deaf culture, and that most of their friends, social events, and ways of relating to other people and the world were through this culture. This made sense, but I always wondered: if you were able to hear, couldn't you form some other culture? If worst came to worst and nobody else wanted to talk to you, couldn't you at least have the Ex-Deaf People's Club?

I don't think so. Deafness acts as a rallying flag that connects people, gives them a shared foundation to build culture off of, and walls the group off from other people. If all deaf people magically became able to hear, their culture would eventually drift apart, and they'd be stuck without an ingroup to call their own.

Part of this is reasonable cost-benefit calculation – our society is so vast and atomized, and forming real cohesive tribes is so hard, that they might reasonably expect it would be a lot of trouble to find another group they liked as much as the deaf community. But another part of this seems to be about an urge to cultural self-preservation.

2. Genocide

This term is kind of overused these days. I always thought of it as meaning literally killing every member of a certain group – the Holocaust, for example – but the new usage includes [“cultural genocide”](#). For example, autism rights advocates [sometimes say](#) that anybody who cured autism would be committing genocide – this is of course [soundly mocked](#), but it makes sense if you think of autistic people as a tribe that would be dissolved absent its rallying flag. The tribe would be eliminated – thus “cultural genocide” is a reasonable albeit polemical description.

It seems to me that people have an urge toward cultural self-preservation which is as strong or stronger as the urge to individual self-preservation. Part of this is rational cost-benefit calculation – if someone loses their only tribe and ends up alone in the vast and atomized sea of modern society, it might take years before they can find another tribe and really be at home there. But a lot of it seems to be beyond that, an emotional certainty that losing one’s culture and having it replaced with another is not okay, any more than being killed at the same time someone else has a baby is okay. Nor do I think this is necessarily irrational; locating the

thing whose survival you care about in the self rather than the community is an assumption, and people can make different assumptions without being obviously wrong.

3. Rationalists

The rationalist community is a group of people (of which I'm a part) who met reading the site Less Wrong and who tend to hang out together online, sometimes hang out together in real life, and tend to befriend each other, work with each other, date each other, and generally move in the same social circles. Some people call it a cult, but that's more a sign of some people having lost vocabulary for anything between "totally atomized individuals" and "outright cult" than any particular cultishness.

But people keep asking me what exactly the rationalist community *is*. Like, what is the thing they believe that makes them rationalists? It can't just be about being rational, because loads of people are interested in that and most of them aren't part of the community. And it can't just be about transhumanism because there are a lot of transhumanists who aren't rationalists, and lots of rationalists who aren't transhumanists. And it can't just be about Bayesianism, because pretty much everyone, rationalist or otherwise, agrees that is a kind of statistics that is useful for some things but not others. So what, exactly, is it?

This question has always bothered me, but now after thinking about it a lot I finally have a clear answer: rationalism is the belief

that Eliezer Yudkowsky is the rightful caliph.

No! Sorry! I think “the rationalist community” is a tribe much like the Sunni or Shia that started off with some pre-existing differences, found a rallying flag, and then developed a culture.

The pre-existing differences range from the obvious to the subtle. A lot of rationalists are mathematicians, programmers, or computer scientists. The average IQ is in the 130s. White men are overrepresented, but so are LGBT and especially transgender people. But there’s more. Nobody likes the Myers-Briggs test, but I continue to find it really interesting that rationalists have some Myers-Briggs types (INTJ/INTP) at ten times the ordinary rate, and other types (ISFJ/ESFP) at only one one-hundredth the ordinary rate. Myers-Briggs doesn’t cleave reality at its joints, but if it measures anything at all about otherwise hard-to-explain differences in thinking styles, the rationalist community heavily selects for those same differences. Sure enough, I am *constantly* running into people who say “This is the only place where I’ve ever found people who think like me” or “I finally feel understood”.

The rallying flag was the Less Wrong Sequences. Eliezer Yudkowsky started a blog (actually, borrowed Robin Hanson’s) about cognitive biases and how to think through them. Whether or not you agreed with him or found him enlightening loaded heavily on those pre-existing differences, so the people who showed up in the comment section got along and started meeting up with each other. “Do you like Eliezer Yudkowsky’s blog?” became a useful proxy for all sorts of things, eventually somebody coined the word “ratio-

nalist” to refer to people who did, and then you had a group with nice clear boundaries.

The development is everything else. Obviously a lot of jargon sprung up in the form of terms from the blog itself. The community got heroes like Gwern and Anna Salamon who were notable for being able to approach difficult questions insightfully. It doesn't have much of an outgroup yet – maybe just bioethicists and evil robots. It has its own foods – MealSquares, that one kind of chocolate everyone in Berkeley started eating around the same time – and [its own games](#). It *definitely* has its own inside jokes. I think its most important aspect, though, is a set of shared mores – everything from “understand the difference between ask and guess culture and don't get caught up in it” to “cuddling is okay” to “don't misgender trans people” – and a set of shared philosophical assumptions like utilitarianism and reductionism.

I'm stressing this because I keep hearing people ask “What is the rationalist community?” or “It's really weird that I seem to be involved in the rationalist community even though I don't share belief X” as if there's some sort of necessary-and-sufficient featherless-biped-style ideological criterion for membership. This is why people are saying “Lots of you aren't even singularitarians, and everyone agrees Bayesian methods are useful in some places and not so useful in others, so what is your community even *about* ?” But once again, it's ~~about Eliezer Yudkowsky being the rightful caliph~~ it's not necessarily *about* anything.

If you take only one thing from this essay, it's that communities are best understood not logically but historically. If you want to understand the Shia, don't reflect upon the true meaning of Ali being the rightful caliph, understand that a dispute involving Ali initiated ethnogenesis, the resulting culture picked up a bunch of features and became useful to various people, and now here we are. If you want to understand the rationalist community, don't ask exactly how near you have to think the singularity has to be before you qualify for membership, focus on the fact that some stuff Eliezer Yudkowsky wrote led to certain people identifying themselves as "rationalists" and for various reasons I enjoy dinner parties with those people about 10000% more interesting than dinner parties with randomly selected individuals. [nostalgebraist](#) actually summed this up really well: "Maybe the real rationalism was the friends we made along the way." Maybe that's the real Shia Islam too, and the real Democratic Party, and so on.

4. Evangelical And Progressive Religion

There seems to be a generational process, sort of like Harold Lee's [theory of immigrant assimilation](#), by which religions dissolve. The first generation believes everything literally. The second generation believes that the religion might not be literally true, but it's an important expression of universal values and they still want to follow the old ways and participate in the church/temple/mosque/mandir community. The third generation is completely secularized.

This was certainly my family's relationship with Judaism. My great-great-grandfather was so Jewish that he left America and returned to Eastern Europe because he was upset at American Jews for not being religious enough. My great-grandfather stayed behind in America but remained a very religious Jew. My grandparents attend synagogue when they can remember, speak a little Yiddish, and identify with the traditions. My parents went to a *really* liberal synagogue where the rabbi didn't believe in God and everyone just agreed they were going through the motions. I got Bar Mitzvahed when I was a kid but haven't been to synagogue in years. My children probably won't even have that much.

So imagine you're an evangelical Christian. All the people you like are also evangelical Christians. Most of your social life happens at church. Most of your good memories involve things like Sunday school and Easter celebrations, and even your bittersweet memories are things like your pastor speaking at your parents' funeral. Most of your hopes and dreams involve marrying someone and having kids and then sharing similarly good times with them. When you try to hang out with people who aren't evangelical Christians, they seem to think really differently than you do, and not at all in a good way. A lot of your happiest intellectual experiences involve geeking out over different Bible verses and the minutiae of different Christian denominations.

Then somebody points out to you that God probably doesn't exist. And even if He does, it's probably in some vague and complicated way, and not the way that means that the Thrice-Reformed Meta-Baptist Church and *only* the Thrice-Reformed Meta-Baptist Church

has the correct interpretation of the Bible and everyone else is wrong.

On the one hand, their argument might be convincing. On the other, you are pretty sure that if everyone agreed on this, your culture would be destroyed. Sure, your kids could be Christmas-and-Easter-Christians who still enjoy the cultural aspects and derive personal meaning from the Bible. But you're pretty sure that within a couple of generations your descendents would be exactly as secular as anyone else. Absent the belief that serves as your culture's wall against the outside world, it would dissolve without a trace into the greater homogeneity of Western liberal society. So, do you keep believing a false thing? Or do you give up on everything you love and enjoy and dissolve into a culture that mostly hates and mocks people like you? There's no good choice. This is why it sucks that things like religion and politics are both rallying flags for tribes, and actual things that there may be a correct position on.

5. Religious Literalism

One comment complaint I heard during the height of the Atheist-Theist Online Wars was that atheists were a lot like fundamentalists. Both wanted to interpret the religious texts in the most literal possible way.

Being on the atheist side of these wars, I always wanted to know: well, why wouldn't you? Given that the New Testament clearly says you have to give all your money to the poor, and the Old Testament

doesn't say anything about mixing meat and milk, maybe religious Christians should start giving everything to the poor and religious Jews should stop worrying so much about which dishes to use when?

But I think this is the same mistake as treating the Sunni as an organization dedicated to promoting an Abu Bakr caliphate. The holy book is the rallying flag for a religion, but the religion is not itself about the holy book. The rallying flag created a walled-off space where people could undergo the development process and create an independent culture. That independent culture may diverge significantly from the holy book.

I think that very neurotypical people naturally think in terms of tribes, and the idea that they have to retool their perfectly functional tribe to conform to the exact written text of its holy book or constitution or stated political ideology or something seems silly to them. I think that less neurotypical people – a group including many atheists – think less naturally in terms of tribes and so tend to take claims like “Christianity is about following the Bible” at face value. But Christianity is about being part of the Christian tribe, and although that tribe started around the Bible, maintains its coherence because of the Bible, and is of course naturally influenced by it, if it happens to contradict the Bible in some cases that's not necessarily surprising or catastrophic.

This is also why I'm not really a fan of debates over whether Islam is really “a religion of peace” or “a religion of violence”, especially if those debates involve mining the Quran for passages that sup-

port one's preferred viewpoint. It's not just because the Quran is a mess of contradictions with enough interpretive degrees of freedom to prove anything at all. It's not even because Islam is a host of separate cultures as different from one another as Unitarianism is from the Knights Templar. It's because the Quran just created the space in which the Islamic culture could evolve, but had only limited impact on that evolution. As well try to predict the warlike or peaceful nature of the United Kingdom by looking at a topographical map of Great Britain.

6. Cultural Appropriation

Thanks to some people who finally explained this to me in a way that made sense. When an item or artform becomes the rallying flag for a tribe, it can threaten the tribe if other people just want to use it as a normal item or artform.

Suppose that rappers start with pre-existing differences from everyone else. Poor, male, non-white minority, lots of experience living in violent places, maybe a certain philosophical outlook towards their condition. Then they get a rallying flag: rap music. They meet one another, like one another. The culture undergoes further development: the lionization of famous rappers, the development of a vocabulary of shared references. They get all of the benefits of being in a tribe like increased trust, social networking, and a sense of pride and identity.

Now suppose some rich white people get into rap. Maybe they get into rap for innocuous reasons: rap is cool, they like the sound of it. Fine. But they don't share the pre-existing differences, and they can't be easily assimilated into the tribe. Maybe they develop different conventions, and start saying that instead of being about the struggles of living in severe poverty, rap should be about Founding Fathers. Maybe they start saying the original rappers are bad, and they should stop talking about violence and bitches because that ruins rap's reputation. Since rich white people tend to be good at gaining power and influence, maybe their opinions are overrepresented at the Annual Rap Awards, and all of a sudden you can't win a rap award unless your rap is about the Founding Fathers and doesn't mention violence (except Founding-Father-related duels). All of a sudden if you try to start some kind of impromptu street rap-off, you're no longer going to find a lot of people like you whom you instantly get along with and can form a high-trust community. You're going to find half people like that, and half rich white people who strike you as annoying and are always complaining that your raps don't feature any Founding Fathers at all. The rallying flag fails and the tribe is lost as a cohesive entity.

7. Fake Gamer Girls

A more controversial example of the same. Video gaming isn't just a fun way to pass the time. It also brings together a group of people with some pre-existing common characteristics: male, nerdy, often abrasive, not very successful, interested in speculation, high-systematizing. It gives them a rallying flag and creates a culture which then develops its own norms, shared reference points, inter-

net memes, webcomics, heroes, shared gripes, even some [unique literature](#). Then other people with very different characteristics and no particular knowledge of the culture start enjoying video games just because video games are fun. Since the Gamer Tribe has no designated cultural spaces except video games forums and magazines, they view this as an incursion into their cultural spaces and a threat to their existence as a tribe.

Stereotypically this is expressed as them getting angry when girls start playing video games. One can argue that it's unfair to infer tribe membership based on superficial characteristics like gender – in the same way it might be unfair for the Native Americans to assume someone with blonde hair and blue eyes probably doesn't follow the Old Ways – but from the tribe's perspective it's a reasonable first guess.

I've found gamers to get along pretty well with women who share their culture, and poorly with men who don't – but admit that the one often starts from an assumption of foreignness and the other from an assumption of membership. More important, I've found the *idea* of the rejection of the 'fake gamer girl', real or not, raised more as a libel by people who genuinely *do* want to destroy gamer culture, in the sense of cleansing video-game-related spaces of a certain type of person/culture and making them entirely controlled by a different type of person/culture, in much the same way that a rich white person who says any rapper who uses violent lyrics needs to be blacklisted from the rap world has a clear culture-change project going on.

These cultural change projects tend to be framed in terms of which culture has the better values, which I think is a limited perspective. I think America has better values than Pakistan does, but that doesn't mean I want us invading them, let alone razing their culture to the ground and replacing it with our own.

8. Subcultures And Posers

[Obligatory David Chapman link](#). A poser is somebody who uses the rallying flag but doesn't have the pre-existing differences that create tribal membership and so never really fits into the tribe.

9. Nationalism, Patriotism, and Racism

Nationalism and patriotism use national identity as the rallying flag for a strong tribe. In many cases, nationalism becomes ethno-nationalism, which builds tribal identity off of a combination of heritage, language, religion, and culture. It has to be admitted that this can make for some *incredibly* strong tribes. The rallying flag is built into ancestry, and so the walls are near impossible to obliterate. The symbolism and jargon and cultural identity can be instilled from birth onward. Probably the best example of this is the Jews, who combine ethnicity, religion, and language into a bundle deal and have resisted assimilation for millennia.

Sometimes this can devolve into racism. I'm not sure exactly what the difference between ethno-nationalism and racism is, or whether there even *is* a difference, except that "race" is a much

more complicated concept than ethnicity and it's probably not a coincidence that it has become most popular in a country like America whose ethnicities are hopelessly confused. The Nazis certainly needed a lot of work to transform concern about the German nation into concern about the Aryan race. But it's fair to say all of this is somewhat related or at least potentially related.

On the other hand, in countries that have non-ethnic notions of heritage, patriotism has an opportunity to substitute for racism. Think about the power of the civil rights message that, whether black or white, we are all Americans.

This is maybe most obvious in sub-national groups. Despite people paying a lot of attention to the supposed racism of Republicans, the rare black Republicans do shockingly well within their party. Both Ben Carson and Herman Cain briefly topped the Republican presidential primary polls during their respective election seasons, and their failures seem to have had much more to do with their own personal qualities than with some sort of generic Republican racism. I see the same with Thomas Sowell, with Hispanic Republicans like Ted Cruz, and Asian Republicans like Bobby Jindal.

Maybe an even stronger example is the human biodiversity movement, which many people understandably accuse of being entirely about racism. Nevertheless, some of its most leading figures are black – JayMan and Chanda Chisala (who is adjacent to the movement but gets lots of respect within it) – and they seem to get equal treatment and respect to their white counterparts. Their

membership in a strong and close-knit tribe screens off everything else about them.

I worry that attempts to undermine nationalism/patriotism in order to fight racism risk backfiring. The weaker the “American” tribe becomes, the more people emphasize their other tribes – which can be either overtly racial or else heavily divided along racial lines (eg political parties). It continues to worry me that people who would never display an American flag on their lawn because “nations are just a club for hating foreigners” now have a campaign sign on their lawn, five bumper stickers on their car, and are identifying more and more strongly with political positions – ie clubs for hating their fellow citizens.

Is there such a thing as conservation of tribalism? Get rid of one tribal identity and people just end up seizing on another? I’m not sure. And anyway, nobody can agree on exactly what the American identity or American tribe is anyway, so any conceivable such identity would probably risk alienating a bunch of people. I guess that makes it a moot point. But I still think that deliberately trying to eradicate patriotism is not as good an idea as is generally believed.

V

I think tribes are interesting and underdiscussed. And in a lot of cases when they are discussed, it’s within preexisting frameworks that tilt the playing field towards recognizing some tribes as funda-

mentally good, others as fundamentally bad, and ignoring the commonalities between all of them.

But in order to talk about tribes coherently, we need to talk about rallying flags. And that involves admitting that a lot of rallying flags are based on ideologies (which are sometimes wrong), holy books (which are *always* wrong), nationality (which we can't define), race (which is racist), and works of art (which some people inconveniently want to enjoy just as normal art without any connotations).

My title for this post is also my preferred summary: the ideology is not the movement. Or, more jargonishly – the rallying flag is not the tribe. People are just trying to find a tribe for themselves and keep it intact. This often involves defending an ideology they might not be tempted to defend for any other reason. This doesn't make them bad, and it *may* not even necessarily mean their tribe deserves to go extinct. I'm reluctant to say for sure whether I think it's okay to maintain a tribe based on a faulty ideology, but I think it's at least important to understand that these people are in a crappy situation with no good choices, and they deserve some pity.

Some vital aspects of modern society – freedom of speech, freedom of criticism, access to multiple viewpoints, the existence of entryist tribes with explicit goals of invading and destroying competing tribes as problematic, and the overwhelming pressure to dissolve into the Generic Identity Of Modern Secular Consumerism – make maintaining tribal identities really hard these days. I think some of the most interesting sociological questions revolve around whether there are any ways around the practical and moral difficul-

ties with tribalism, what social phenomena are explicable as the struggle of tribes to maintain themselves in the face of pressure, and whether tribalism continues to be a worthwhile or even a possible project at all.

EDIT: Commenters point out a very similar Melting Asphalt post, [Religion Is Not About Beliefs.](#)