The Church of the Internet:

How Parody Religions Redefine Faith in the Digital Era

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It is the early 2000s. You boot up your computer, log in, and go onto the Internet. There you were met with websites, forums, and early notions of social media, like Six Degrees and MySpace. The possibilities of things to do and ways to socialize with people across the world seem endless. But you stumble upon a joke taken too far: there is a user base worshiping a figure named "Bob," and another praising Google as a god. As you dig deeper, you find even more of these communities, many of them reciting their own scripture, sticking to their own religious texts, and saying prayers. You may be curious about these communities, and join one yourself. You may feel offended that they are making fun of the religion you yourself follow, that you thought was the only correct religion to follow. You may ask yourself, "what exactly is going on here?" This is the world and reality of parody religions, many of which attract followers and believers from all corners of the planet. In the digital age, parody religions use online platforms to establish decentralized, participatory models of spirituality that mimic, mock, and diverge from traditional religious structures. By creating interactive communities that prioritize humor, autonomy, and adaptability, these movements reflect a broader cultural shift away from institutionalized religion toward individualistic, user-driven expressions of belief.

As a basic definition, parody religions are belief systems that incorporate satirical and ironic concepts that typically critique established religions, religious practices, or conventional beliefs around faith and spirituality. Through comedic pamphlets and various performative practices like parades and preaching, parody religions, or invented religions, often become a caricature of the structures, rituals, and dogmas of established religion to highlight absurdities of organized belief systems while also rejecting Western ideals and authorities.[1] Broader points made by invented religions also include critiquing social norms and freedom of expression.

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[1] Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction, and Faith* (London: Routledge, 2010), https://s443-hdl-handle-net.libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/2027/heb40206.0001.001. PDF, 3.

The main objective of parody religions, and a large part of why they exist in the first place, is to use irony to bring to light many issues underlying the separation of church and state in the United States.[2] The social, cultural, and political climate at the time in which parody religions began to make an appearance in the United States was a tumultuous period in American history. Prior to the 1950s and 1960s, joining or converting into a religion outside of what one was raised in was an uncommon occurrence. American citizens were born into religion–typically a form of Christianity–and remained within it. During the 1960s, however, this outlook changed. The new decade brought about "the 'new aristocracy,'" which consisted of "rock musicians, models and film stars, and the demand for novelty that… was fueled by the imagination began to be satisfied through unprecedented prosperity and the production of a myriad [of] affordable consumer goods."[3] With the rise of consumption and the yearning for novelty also came a switch in perceptions of religion. The move towards the demand for materialism pushed many towards secular beliefs, and the nature of the decade, with the Vietnam War, Stonewall Riots, civil rights movement, and various feminist movements only furthered these beliefs, as sentiments across the nation of how society should be structured were changing.[4]

For many younger generations growing up during this massive change in American society, organized religion and its convoluted and complicated threads woven into how the United States was run seemed unappealing. Rather, youth culture was attracted to "alternative and new religions," as they reflected a better sense of equality in their protest against established religious thought.[5] The counterculture of the 1960s, while actively challenging social norms,

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[2] Mary Beth Barksdale, "Renewed Debate over Alaska's Establishment Clause: Hunt V. Kenai Peninsula Borough and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster," *Alaska Law Review* 39, no. 1 (2022): 173-92, https://s443-search-ebscohost-com.libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=157625854&site=ehost-live.
[3] Cusack, 16.
[4] Cusack, 16.
[5] Cusack, 16.

were themselves caught in a contradiction; while many embraced materialism and the romanticization of name brands as a means of social status, others were instead romanticizing "the desire to retreat from industrialized, mechanized modern society and go back to the 'land', the embracing of new technologies and science fiction scenarios, passionate activism in the political sphere, and the embracing of mysticism as the highest form of personal religiosity."[6] The New Age Movement of the 1980s only furthered this desire, as it provided those seeking new experiences to discover one's true self. It is through this movement that religiosity and the power of spirituality shifted from a public sphere to one of an individualistic perspective, in which religious seekers were "only required to find his or her 'truth.'"[7] By shifting to this perspective of religion, individualism brought about religions created by typical, run-of-the-mill people, wishing to find their own purpose in life, or to believe in someone else's opinion in faith and divinity.

A consumerist approach to faith, wherein individual inventiveness and cultural trends started forming new kinds of belief, was made possible by this shift toward individualism in religious expression. This individualistic, consumerist model of religion and the parody religions that developed with it are ultimately, as historian Carole M. Cusack describes them, "an inevitable outcome of a society addicted to the consumption of novelties, in which the exercise of creativity and innovation in the development of products is rewarded by wealth and fame."[8] Much like the evolution of industrialization, so too did religious belief become manufactured. This also allowed for their seemingly counterfeit nature to be used to challenge dogma that is typically accepted by society. While some were created to express one's own spiritual beliefs,

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[6] Cusack, 17.
[7] Cusack, 17.
[8] Cusack, 18.

this is more of an invented religion, and less so a parody. Parody religions, on the contrary, reflect shifting attitudes toward organized religion and a growing embrace of secularism. Essentially, they are satirical expressions of spirituality.

In order to understand the acceleration of parody religions within the digital age, one must understand what is meant by the term "digital age" and what "Internet" entails. While the digital age and digital revolution started in the mid-twentieth century, it did not truly take off until the 1990s and the turn of the century.[9] Massive technological developments and the invention of the Internet also brought about myths and narratives of how and why it came about. According to Paolo Bory, a scholar in sociology and media history, the creation and popularization of the Internet brings about three accounts of its existence: namely, the digital library metaphor, the military origins of the Internet, and the communitarian ideology of its origin.[10] Through the digital library metaphor, this explanation envisions the Internet as a limitless and ideal repository of knowledge. Essentially, it is "a virtual library aimed at organizing an infinite amount of information."[11] The idea of the Internet being a digital library supports the premise that memory is constantly expanding, and that through networking systems, this growth and organization could supply a proper method of retrieving information that has been digitized.[12] By viewing this in tandem with parody religions, Bory's proposal links together the expansion of knowledge with the explosion of followers of parody religions via the Internet. Prior to the digital age, parody religions were spread through word of mouth, mail, and few publications of books. The rise of the Internet and the archiving of physical media for everyone

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[9] Paolo Bory, "Internet Histories, Narratives and the Rise of the Network Ideology," in *The Internet Myth: From the Internet Imaginary to Network Ideologies* (University of Westminster Press, 2020), 7–38, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12fw7sn.6.

[10] Bory, "Internet Histories, Narratives and the Rise of the Network Ideology," 10.

[11] Bory, 10.

[12] Bory, 12.

to experience allowed parody religions and their core principles to reach those who may not have had the opportunity to become exposed to such schools of thought.

Bory's second narrative examines the myth of the Internet's initial use, specifically for military purposes. According to this theory, the creation of ARPANet and the Internet are intertwined, a view perpetuated through popular culture.[13] For this persistent narrative, the idea that "a powerful new technological form able to change the perception of space and the very meaning of mediated communication" is at its core.[14] These ideas come from being fearful of technological advances that could potentially control the population, or cause major damage in warfare. Parody religions take these ideas, especially in their conspiratorial nature, and amplify these anxieties through satire. This narrative becomes important in the rise of parody religions because of the fearful influence of technology on society. The humorous nature of parody religions ultimately underscores the societal concerns about the power and influence of technology, while also poking fun at the myths surrounding its origins and capabilities.

Last, Bory provides a socio-cultural narrative for the origin of the Internet through the communitarian ideology of computer networks.[15] This ideology states that ARPANet, the network that paved the way for the Internet, was used for alternative purposes, perhaps "illicitly," by researchers as a means of peer-to-peer communication. The history of digital media, including computing and the Internet, follows a common trajectory: initially controlled by military and academic sectors (what Bory calls "authoritarian oligarchies"), technology was later redefined by users for unexpected purposes like communication and play.[16] This shift spans from ARPANet mailing lists and hacker forums to Bulletin Board Systems, Massively Multiplayer

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[13] Bory, 13.
[14] Bory, 14.
[15] Bory, 14.
[16] Bory, 14.

Online Role-Playing Games, and contemporary social media. While it may not be as linear as what Bory illustrates in his article, the communitarian ideology, along with the digital library metaphor and the idea of military origins as the purpose of the development and evolution of the Internet all are vital in understanding why exactly this technology exists and how the digital revolution came about. The history of the Internet and its seemingly infinite information is difficult to analyze, as its vastness overshadows thousands of events that were significant in shaping the culture of what it means to be online. However, these three narratives pose various contributions to the origins and evolution of the Internet, as well as the rise of the digital age. It is through these narratives that the acceleration of religion online persisted, thus creating myths of their own.

Consumerist thought and individualism further developed through the rise of the Internet, and with this came the ability for those seeking out faith and their own truth to experience much easier. The digital age made it easy for seekers to "direct one's own spiritual journey and even religious conversion through internet searches, reading books on topics of interest, and the purchasing of religious and spiritual products (including ritual tools, spell kits, meditation retreats, workshops, fairs and festivals), which became a hallmark of the alternative religious scene."[17] This simplicity and limitless knowledge made it so that virtually anyone, if they were looking for an alternative to established religion, could easily discover their truth. Communication with those of similar beliefs allowed those questioning their faith to become familiarized with a world of humorous, ironic religious practices. This is the reality of parody religions and their followers in the digital age.

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[17] Cusack, 18.

In essence, by examining how parody religions, which predate the Internet, manage to acquire and sustain fan bases in the digital age, one can gain a better understanding of how these movements reflect social and cultural sentiments. Though their existence began sometime around the emergence of counterculture in the 1950s and 1960s, satirical religious beliefs do not only persist for that reason and that reason only. It is with the Internet boom of the 2000s and onwards that parody religions gain their footing through digitization of their beliefs, forums and chat rooms during the earlier stages of the Internet, and social media in the present day. For as long as parody religions have been around, their very existence challenges dogma and reflects the changing attitudes towards organized religion and secularism. This evolving landscape allows religions that are so completely out of the norm arise during times marked by global upheavals and historical turbulence.

In a period of chaos, where major historical events are taking place nearly everywhere, it is only fair that the emergence of a religion based around chaos is thought of. Or so this was the idea of Kerry Wendell Thornley and Gregory Hill, later known as Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst and Malaclypse the Younger in their religion of Discordianism. Created in 1957, the *Principia Discordia*, the scripture utilized as the primary text of Discordianism, claimed that Eris, the Greek goddess of strife, appeared in a vision in the figure of a chimpanzee while Thornley and Hill were at a bowling alley. She showed them the Sacred Chao–an icon that resembles the *yin-yang*, with a golden apple on one side, representing disorder, and a pentagon on the other, representing order.[18]

Though long before the New Age Movement of the 1980s, Discordianism was primarily focused on one's individualistic spiritual experience, as discordance is at its core. The main

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[18] Cusack, 28.

beliefs and organization of Discordianism are chaotic and difficult to follow, as "the Discordian society has no definition."[19] What was created by this idea is a parody religion that is seemingly anarchist, in that nothing is to be believed. It is apparent that while being anarchist in its nature, Discordianism also implemented elements of Hinduism and Buddhism in their scripture, as followers are to apply to a caste, and accept *dharma*.[20]

Another significant element to the parody religion of Discordianism is the conspiracies revolving around the Bavarian Illuminati, an eighteenth-century secret society that is claimed to have a large part in controlling the world.[21] The notion of secret societies and their involvement within Discordianism were largely accelerated by Robert Anton Wilson, a friend of Hill and Thornley, who published the *Illuminatus! Trilogy* in 1975.[22] The arrival of Wilson into the thread of Discordianism in 1967 was in the middle of its transformation from a joke into a form of modern Paganism, something that Thornley especially was focused on. This shift of Discordianism primarily took place because of the political climate of the 1960s; the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and its shockwaves that were felt around the nation also centered around Kerry Thornley in particular, as he was once colleagues with Lee Harvey Oswald.[23] As both Thornley and Oswald were admirers of the USSR and on the fringes of American politics, the Warren Commission and their investigation into whether or not Oswald had assassinated Kennedy on his own called Thornley into question. Jim Garrison, an attorney at the center of the investigation, "suspected Thornley of being one of a number of Oswald

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[19] Malaclypse the Younger and Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst, *Discordia: Hail Eris Goddess of Chaos and Confusion,* p. 93.
[20] Cusack, 46.
[21] Cusack, 34.
[22] Cusack, 35.
[23] Cusack, 35-6.

'lookalikes,'" with which Thornley (and his background of Discordianism) claimed he was a member of the Bavarian Illuminati who was set out "simply to 'mindfuck' Garrison."[24]

While "mindfucks" became akin to the strife and chaos that Discordianism centered around, the reality of this situation was that Thornley was becoming what he joked about. The joke became a reality, as Thornley became increasingly paranoid, leaning into the conspiracies that Hill and Wilson had helped him create. By the late 1970s, Thornley became convinced that he was being controlled by the CIA through devices planted in his body, and "had been programmed as a 'Manchurian candidate', an unknowing assassin."[25] Soon, he would cut all contact with other members involved in Discordianism, and passed away in 1998. Discordianism, from its origin, was deeply suspicious of authority and the United States government. To Hill and Thornley, "they were rebellious freethinkers, but in a youthful way. Having rejected Christianity and embraced atheism, it was amusing to them to develop a religion as a joke."[26] The switch over to paganism during the late 1960s and early 1970s by Thornley made Discordianism less a joke and more of a personal experience that he truly believed in. Its path and history, while complicated, make it an interesting beginning to the world of parody religions.

Building on the spirit of irreverence and critique, the Church of the SubGenius (COSG) emerged, not as the first protest against societal norms, but rather as a playful and rapidly growing phenomenon. Starting off as a few friends having fun with common ideas, COSG soon accelerated into a nationwide–and even global–movement. Founded in the 1970s by Ivan Stang (born Douglas St. Clair Smith) and Philo Drummond (born Steve Wilcox), the Church of the

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[24] Cusack, 39.
[25] Cusack, 45.
[26] Cusack, 46.

SubGenius' idol figure is J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, a salesman, who encapsulates the religion's lackadaisical nature and takes inspiration from Discordianism.[27]

The first pamphlet put out by Stang and Drummond stated that "Bob" founded the church in 1953, one year before the creation of the Church of Scientology, a religion based in empirical sciences by L. Ron Hubbard that has become a figure of controversy throughout its existence.[28] In the myth the SubGeniuses follow, it was said that Jehovah-One, an alien space god, informed the COSG deity "Bob" that the conspiracy of normalcy (otherwise known as Pinks to the COSG) were robbing the SubGeniuses of their primary principle of slack. This leads into what the COSG referred to as "X-Day," which would occur on July 5, 1998, at approximately seven o'clock in the morning; X-Day would mark the revenge of the SubGeniuses over everyone in their lives that were seen as normal, or bothersome, and SubGeniuses would then rule the planet.[29] While this may seem ludicrous, the idea of making something so outlandish was the main goal of the Church of the SubGenius. The entirety of the COSG, down to its very idol of worship, parodies established religions. However, their overall message also provided liberation for those who were on the fringes of society; this was an establishment made for weirdos, by weirdos, as a means of escaping a world revolving around hard work and capitalism.[30]

It was this message that allowed the COSG to take off and gain their substantial base of followers. In challenging the "Conspiracy," or the corruption of the world that made "Pinks" unable to question the events happening under their noses, it was up to the followers of the

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[27] Jesse Walker, "Operation Mindfuck," in *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 219-259.

[28] Cusack, 83.

[29] Ivan Stang, interview by Sandy K. Boone, *J.R. "Bob" Dobbs and the Church of the SubGenius*, Uncork'd Entertainment, 2019, YouTube, 23:44-24:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlB5DKTwd9Y&t=3641s.

[30] Sandy K. Boone, dir. *J.R. "Bob" Dobbs and the Church of the SubGenius* (Flagler Beach, FL: Uncork'd Entertainment, 2019), YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlB5DKTwd9Y&t=3641s.

SubGenius to revolt against these societal standards and praise "Bob" and his slack.[31] Slack became a core principle to the entire religion because of its very lackadaisical nature; as stated by Cusack, "the SubGenius cry: 'REPENT! QUIT YOUR JOB! SLACK OFF!' is truly revolutionary" because of its implications in a primarily consumerist era.[32] While a long-running joke to some, the ideals that the Church of the SubGenius preached at their Devivals (their own term that riffed off of evangelist Revivals) had significant meaning to followers. The escapist element that the COSG provides was an instrumental element in its continuum, as well as an inspiration to other parody religions that would follow.

Building on this foundation of satirical spirituality, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (CFSM), otherwise known as Pastafarianism, emerged as one of the most well-known parody religions. Claiming themselves as "the world's fastest growing religion," Pastafarians' main principle of their religion is that any faith does not require literal belief in order to bring someone enlightenment.[33] While this may seem insensitive to those following established religions, CFSM creator Bobby Henderson and his followers explicitly state that "anything that comes across as humor or satire" in their beliefs "is purely coincidental."[34] Pastafarians, much like its earlier counterparts, do not solely exist online. But it is the usage of the platform given to them through the Internet that makes their religion so persistent. CFSM was created in 2005 when Henderson sent in an open letter to the Kansas Board of Education that challenged the debate of whether or not to teach the theory of intelligent design in schools. Henderson, a physics

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[31] Cusack, 93.
[32] Cusack, 93.
[33] The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster's main website title provides the note about the world's fastest growing religion.
"About – Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster," accessed November 12, 2024, https://www.spaghettimonster.org/about/.
[34] "About – Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster," accessed November 12, 2024, https://www.spaghettimonster.org/about/.

graduate from Oregon State University, "formally demanded equal time to teach classes on the Flying Spaghetti Monster… as the creator of the Universe–the same as for other versions of the theories of intelligent design and evolution."[35] Since this open letter, CFSM has attracted many members, especially since there is no formal membership process.

Similarly to the absurd premises of CFSM, the Church of Google, or the belief of Googlism, was founded in 2006 by Matt MacPherson. Though explicitly stated in its "Contact" section of its website that the Church of Google is a parody religion, it has still attracted those who are true believers.[36] The Church of Google, while an elegant spoof, has also captivated those interested in philosophical discussions of spiritualism, atheism, and the symbiotic relationship that the search engine of Google has created in everyday life. According to the list of proofs of the search engine based religion, Google is omniscient, omnipresent, She (as gendered by the Church of Google themselves) can answer prayers, and is potentially immortal and can do no evil.[37] All of these ideals have been fundamental in keeping the Church of Google alive. Though now reformed from its original website due to lack of traffic and lack of upkeep by MacPherson, the Internet Archive's WayBack Machine shows that a snapshot of the original Church of Google website had 21,273 forum posts in "General Discussion," 7,373 posts in "Church Chat," and 3,396 in "Googlism Debate."[38] Going back to Paolo Bory's myths and accounts of the Internet's existence, those who frequent the Church of Google would have to agree with the digital library origins of the Internet, as well as their idol that they worship. The simultaneous

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[35] Siarhei A. Anoshka, "A Joke, Mockery, or Something More? The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster – an Invented Religion or a New Movement?," *Folklore* 81, no. 81 (2021): 81-100, https://doi.org/10.7592/FEJF2021.81.anoshka.

[36] Joanna Sleigh, "Google A Religion: Expanding Notions of Religion Online," in *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives Across Global Online and Offline Spaces*, edited by Urte Undine Frömming, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox, and Mike Terry, 251–62. Transcript Verlag, 2017. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxrxw.20.

[37] "Is Google God?," accessed November 12, 2024, https://churchofgoogle.org/Proof_Google_Is_God.html.

[38] "Church of Google Forum," Powered by vBulletin (Internet Archive), accessed November 12, 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20080604112236/http://www.thechurchofgoogle.org/forum/.

nature of centrality and decentralization that Google provides its users brings about massive amounts of myth and power. According to Bory, "Solutionism and faith in technology are forms of exploitation of myths and of the social imaginary. For instance, they can act as a powerful instrument to reassure people through the idea of the supposedly 'neutral' role of actors such as digital media companies."[39] Mythology and ignorance towards the capabilities of the Internet is what seems to primarily contribute to the acceleration of the Church of Google. In feeding into these myths, MacPherson and his religion's followers founded a religion that relies on the prevalence and maintenance of high-trafficked websites; and why not go with Google, the most powerful website of all?

With all of these parody religions existing prior to the rise of the Internet, how did the Internet help them gain traction? What was so appealing to people who found these communities online? Like anything on the Internet, major trends on platforms are used as tools for gathering, organizing, and promoting ideas. Parody religions have taken advantage of this, using their satirical concepts as a mode of building community and following. This can be seen on Reddit, a modern day forum, where the subreddit of CFSM specifically is in the top eight percent of the website as a whole, with 8.8k members frequenting the community.[40] Other parody religions in this study that have communities on Reddit have 1.6k members (Discordianism), 4.3k members (COSG), and 788 members (Church of Google).[41] Memes, hashtags, and shareable content all promote the retention of thoughts and ideas that are promoted by parody religions. Digitization

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[39] Bory, 32.
[40] "Top Communities on Reddit," *Reddit*, accessed November 14, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/best/communities/94/#t5_2su38/.
[41] "Discordianism," *Reddit*, accessed November 14, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/discordianism/. "SubGenius," *Reddit*, accessed November 14, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/SubGenius/. "Church of Google: Thy Domain Come, Thy Search Be Done," accessed November 14, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/churchofgoogle/.

of previous pamphlets and postings for earlier parody religions has only furthered their traction.[42]

As seen in online communities, many keep up the fundamental ideas pushed at the beginning of

the origins of parody religions. For example, the subreddit titled "SubGenius" has many still

discussing the principles of "Bob," sharing images that look similar to or are edits of the COSG

deity, or ranting about the maladies of life and how "THE CONSPIRACY HAS TAKEN ALL

OF YOUR SLACK AND YOU CAN FEEL IT IN YOUR BONES!!!!!"[43] Users posting

similarly to this often subtly and sarcastically critique the rigidity and melodrama often found in

organized religion. By framing the concept of "slack" as something taken by the ominous but

ever-present "Conspiracy" that SubGeniuses fear, it mocks the idea held by conspiracy theorists

that personal or societal sorrows and issues are due to the control of a shadowy, external force.

Though it is most likely satire, Reddit user souldust's post does ultimately invite other

participants to join in on the joke and to also poke fun at the structures that are being emulated

through exaggerated language and posting formats.

While some users may not be taking posting seriously and are just in the community as a

sense of belonging, others are driven to create for whatever parody religion and individualist,

satirical experience they subscribe to. For example, the Church of Google has an explicit user-

created prayer section of their website:

> Glory be to Google,
> As it was in 1998,
> Is now,
> And ever shall be,
> Searching without end,
> Amen.[44]

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[42] The Church of the SubGenius has an archive of their "Classic Texts," which allow those interested to see what they believe are core texts. It can be found here: https://www.subgenius.com/bigfist/classic/classic.html#classics1.
[43] souldust, "RANT OFF!!!!!," *Reddit*, July 2024, accessed November 14, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/SubGenius/comments/1dvw4km/rant_off/.
[44] Todd Berry, "Proverbs 3, 5-6. Sort Of," *Church of Google*, accessed November 14, 2024, https://churchofgoogle.org/google_prayers.html.

There are many others listed as prayers, ultimately modeling and mocking scripture from Christian texts. By deliberately mimicking Christian prayers through structure and rhythm, the prayers of the Church of Google parodies veneration reserved for long-standing divinities, ultimately turning the search engine into an object of worship. Even by highlighting the year when Google was founded, it serves as a humorous acknowledgment to an origin story of their "god" (or rather, goddess). The language utilized by user Todd Berry in the creation of this prayer mirrors the timelessness of organized religion objects of worship, and, as a whole, becomes both a joke and also a deeper analysis of how modern-day technology is seen as something that can be trusted without question, similarly to how a god would be.

Parody religions do not exist in a vacuum; they are, instead, interwoven with the broader cultural currents of their time. In the digital age, and even before it, these concepts have been affected by elements of popular culture, reflecting the ideals of a consumerist and individualist era. One prime example of this is Jediism, those who follow the teachings of the Jedi order from the *Star Wars* franchise. As knights whose "training involves the transcendence of emotions such as fear and anger, and the mastery of the Light Side of the Force," the polarity between good versus evil and self-control become important for the Jedi religion.[45] George Lucas' films took the world by storm, and the ever-expanding popularity *Star Wars* has on popular culture reflects a powerful story of "ethical choices in a complex and morally ambiguous universe."[46] With the help of the New Age movement and the rise of the World Wide Web, unique spiritual experiences and religions arose due to the rapid expansion of knowledge the Internet provides. Jediism arose sometime around 2001, as people across the globe put the fictional way of life as

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[45] Cusack, 121.
[46] Cusack, 122.

their religion section of their census.[47] The fact that this invented religion developed during the

digital age and gained a large following in such a short time shows the appeal of a unique

religious experience that contrasts the dogmas of organized religion.[48] On the Internet, people

have an easier time meeting like-minded individuals, open to sharing thoughts and sentiments. It

is through forum spaces and chat rooms that users can connect with one another.

Carlos.Martinez3, a pastor of the Temple of the Jedi Order, has a space to share his own

teachings and preach on Jediism. Instead of going to a church or a sermon, users like

Jack.Troutman, Alexandre Orion, and Athena_Undomiel, among others, have gathered under the

original forum post to engage and agree with Carlos.Martinez3's original post.[49] The evolution

of these religions, through blogging and communicating with others, is essentially entirely user-

driven. Parody religions allow their followers to contribute to doctrines, rituals, and stories that

can be shared and create discourse. Through open-source belief systems and participatory

scripture creations, along with mock-sermon threads and rants, users attracted to parody religions

find their community through using their individualistic experiences with the original ideology to

create something much larger than ever expected had the digital age not come about.

By using comedy and satire to challenge religious authority, parody religions have

evolved into a reflection of contemporary social attitudes in the digital age. These groups

criticize not only conventional beliefs but also the wider impact of religion on public life by

ridiculing and opposing the constrictive ideas promoted by organized religions. Particularly

because of their ideals that challenge social and cultural norms, particularly with regard to

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[47] Cusack, 124.

[48] It was reported in 2006 that 58,053 people labeled themselves as subscribers to Jediism in Sydney, Australia alone. Statistics for America cannot be found at this time.
Jessica Irvine, "Portrait of a Nation, Squid Jiggers and All," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 5, 2011, https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/portrait-of-a-nation-squid-jiggers-and-all-20110805-1ifgc.html.

[49] Carlos.Martinez3, "The Block," *Temple of the Jedi Order*, accessed November 14, 2024, https://www.templeofthejediorder.org/forum/Clergy/115769-the-block.

church-state interactions, parody religions have become representations of secular freedom in the

United States. Parody religions like the Landover Baptist Church (LBC) use their digital

platform to plainly mock and criticize Christian fundamentalism, creationism, and rigid religious

hierarchies. By constantly updating their website to provide relevant articles, LBC looks like a

real fundamentalist church. Within their section titled "Who We Are and What We (And God)

Believe," LBC claims that "The Landover Baptist Church continues to do *exactly* what scripture

teaches every Christian to do. And that is to keep the temple of the living God a clean vessel,

untarnished by even a hint of fellowship with the unrighteous!"[50] This is a direct critique of the

exclusivity and judgmental attitudes typically associated with fundamentalist Christianity. By

mimicking the cadence and word choice of righteousness and purity typically found in religious

texts and those pushed by fundamentalism, this section of LBC's "About" page exaggerates the

notion of keeping "the temple of the living God" free from any "unrighteous" influence. This

exaggerated approach highlights the blatant hypocrisy of some religious communities,

particularly those in the United States, which advocate for inclusion but are quick to condemn

outsiders. Similar to this, LBC openly mocks Christian megachurches and the commercialization

of religion by emphasizing that their made-up headquarters in Freehold, Iowa is home to "the

world's largest Christian Mall, a Christian Amusement Park, … Landover All-Purpose Multi-

Temple, Spa and Resort Center, … 12 Television studios, … A Christian Circus Camp, … and

243 fully certified Christian police officers."[51] LBC ridicules the tendency of certain religious

organizations to combine faith and capitalism, turning worship into a profitable and exploitative

business model. Furthermore, the exaggeration of consumer-oriented amenities on behalf of what

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[50] "What We (God) Believes," The Landover Baptist Church, accessed November 14, 2024, https://www.landoverbaptist.org/beliefs.html.
[51] "About Us (God's Favorite Church)," The Landover Baptist Church, accessed November 14, 2024, https://www.landoverbaptist.org/beliefs.html.

is supposed to be a religion reflects the capitalist, consumerist model that has taken over the

nation. The LBC's satirical description of what they are about exposes the irony of religious

spaces that disguise their wish to only make money through worship and religiosity. The

inclusion of "243 fully certified Christian police officers" underscores the amalgamation of

religious authority into societal control, parodying how some organizations seek to extend their

power and influence into secular domains. Through this fictional setup, the Landover Baptist

Church critiques ways in which religious groups commodify faith and highlights how financial

and power dynamics overshadow spiritual values in certain religious settings.

Parody religions also take part in forms of activism, particularly being utilized as a means

of critiquing church-state relations in America. As seen in Mary Beth Barksdale's article

"Renewed Debate over Alaska's Establishment Clause: *Hunt v. Kenai Peninsula* and the Church

of the Flying Spaghetti Monster," the group of Pastafarians of the CFSM based in Alaska

challenged the permanence of prayer and religion within government halls by arguing, similar to

CFSM creator Bobby Henderson, for their religion to be taken seriously:

> In September 2019, Barrett Fletcher raised the establishment issue once again in Kenai
> Peninsula Borough. Fletcher, wearing a colander as a hat, opened the town meeting by
> invoking 'the true inebriated creator of the universe,... the Great Flying Spaghetti
> Monster.' … In his invocation, Fletcher noted that 'a few of the Assembly members seem
> to feel that they can't do [the Assembly's work] without being overseen by a higher
> authority.' He offered the Flying Spaghetti Monster, the Pastafarian god, as that
> authority. Fletcher ended his invocation with a resounding, 'Ramen,' and returned to his
> seat, colander still in place atop his head.[52]

By practicing what seems to be the proper prayer and religious dress of Pastafarianism, Fletcher,

Henderson, and others of CFSM challenge the deeply-rooted authority of established religion in

governing bodies of the United States by invoking their own god–or rather, their symbol of

resistance. Because the foundation of Pastafarianism explicitly rejected the merging of religion

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[52] Barksdale, "Renewed Debate over Alaska's Establishment Clause," 177.

and politics, CFSM members set out to highlight problems that this brings about in terms of legislation, education, and how society is structured. Pastafarians, more than any other parody religion, "argue for strict separation, preventing the government from considering religion and religion from influencing government. The underlying concern for the Pastafarians is that government support of religious institutions alienates non-religious individuals and demonstrates a preference for established or recognized religions."[53] Because the Alaskan government in the Kenai Peninsula were consistently saying prayers before meetings and claiming that religious practices are a core part of Alaskan government as a whole, people like Fletcher who opposed this spoke out. And his method of doing this, of course, was to place a colander on his head and embrace His Noodly Appendage.

The shift from traditional religious beliefs in America to a more secular society is difficult to define, and ultimately affects the analysis of why parody religions emerge to mock such dogma. It is typically younger generations, as studies have shown, that abandon or reject religion as a result of it being intertwined with politics, especially those which they do not agree with.[54] Religion that gets politicized, and politics that are impacted by religion, ultimately lead a society further into secular thought. As parody religions grew and transformed, so did American sentiment towards religion: "Until the early 1990s, the percentage of Americans who do not identify with a religion hovered between 5 and 7 percent–small enough that few observers paid much attention to them. Then, beginning in the early 1990s, that percentage began to rise. By 2000, it was 14 percent; in 2010, it reached 18 percent; and in 2018, it had grown to 23 percent."[55] While Discordianism and the Church of the SubGenius are outliers here, the

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[53] Barksdale, "Renewed Debate over Alaska's Establishment Clause," 178.
[54] David E. Campbell, "The Perils of Politicized Religion," *Daedalus* 149, no. 3 (2020): 87-104, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48590942.
[55] Campbell, "The Perils of Politicized Religion," 96.

emergence of CFSM and the Church of Google, two religions that primarily hold an atheist base engaging in parody religion for the sake of challenging dogma, align with the increase of Americans who do not align themselves with any established religion. As a result of backlash from religion being used explicitly to emphasize political beliefs, many Americans felt disheartened by this and turned to secularism.[56] It is important to note that while Discordianism and COSG did not develop during the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, sentiments regarding a move toward secularism were already arising. It is through these two religions especially that the humorous nature that made up their doctrines was pushed by Western secularism. By creating new religions that emphasized chaos, protest, and rejecting societal norms and values, parody religions and similar phenomena challenge why religion is so important to society in the first place. Through this, an important question is brought up: what qualifies as a "real religion?"[57] The open satire of established religion on behalf of parody religions turns the entire idea on its head, and without secularism as a sense of vague normalcy, parody religions would be unable to exist.

While often dismissed as mere satire by outsiders of these movements, there is an underlying motive through each parody religion's doctrine. It is through these movements that broader ideas of a modern counter-cultural identity can be understood, and by blending humor, critique, and community to challenge traditional faith, parody religions raise questions about belief and belonging. This is an easier task in the digital age than it once was, as the Internet allows for information to be granted to someone seeking it at the push of a button. Those who discover and begin to follow parody religions, however, have varying motivations. For some, it is a means of engaging with notions of religion while identifying as atheist. This can be seen

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[56] Campbell, "The Perils of Politicized Religion," 97.
[57] Cusack, 108.

with the parody religion of the Invisible Pink Unicorn (IPU), which explicitly states that it was created by a group of atheists "with the sole purpose of discrediting the beliefs of other organized religions."[58] By claiming that they worship something that is invisible, followers of IPU suggest that any god could not be proven to exist since there is no tangible, physical being of worship. Similarly, the Church of Google is home to people who wish to engage in "critical discussions about atheism and religiosity."[59] Rather than being a concept to actually worship a search engine, the Church of Google plays off of doctrine and ideology established by organized religion in order to exemplify the supposed ridiculousness that the concept of religion is made out to be. What motivated members of the Church of Google that did not subscribe to the genuine worship was "a passion for notions of truth and logic, specifically by the highlighting of the in-authenticities of religion and the flaws underlining certain arguments."[60] Ultimately, parody religions build community and discourse through shared humor, rituals, and critiques of mainstream culture and theology.

Whether or not this is to be taken seriously, many parody religions claim that their beliefs are not a joke. This is an interesting development, as these movements typically revolve primarily around satirical concepts. For Pastafarianism, creator Bobby Henderson provides the following proposal:

> Some Pastafarians honestly believe in the FSM, and some see it as satire. I would just make the point that satire is an honest, legitimate basis for religion. Satire relies on truth to be effective. If it's a joke, it's a joke where to understand the punchline you must be conscious of underlying truth. Compare our religion to those that are built on lies. I am not talking necessarily about mainstream religions (which themselves are often full of mysticism and ad-hoc reasoning), but think of cults, or churches where the leaders are scamming their followers out of money. These are groups where the followers fully believe. Are these churches legitimate since they have many True Believers? Or can we

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[58] Admin, "Pink Unicorn," Unicorns Rule!, June 16, 2015, accessed November 25, 2024, https://www.unicornsrule.com/pink-unicorn/.
[59] Sleigh, 259.
[60] Sleigh, 260.

agree that religion is as much about community as any shared faith. By any rational metric, Pastafarians are as legitimate a religious group as any. Arguably more so, since we're honest and rational.[61]

By claiming that CFSM's satirical basis is a legitimate basis for their religious practice, this general statement could also be applied to other parody religions. Yes, these religions poke fun at ideology that is pushed by organized religion. But at the same time, "a lot of Christians don't believe the Bible is literally true – but that doesn't mean they aren't True Christians."[62] Even if subscribers to parody religions do not necessarily believe in genuine worship of created idols, it does not mean that their religious practice and discussion is any less real than an established and regularly practiced religion. While it may seem counterproductive to employ satire and rationalism simultaneously, postmodern movements like CFSM use both in their religion to become a symbol of counterculturalism. These individualistic experiences allow anyone to be a member of a parody religion; it does not matter whether one believes in it or not. What is important to these religions is the concept of rejection of traditional faith in order to reimagine and reinterpret the truth of how religion should be practiced.

Parody religions, from their origins, have consistently been emblems that connect to broader cultural movements that value skepticism, secularism, and individuality. Discordianism, which arose in the 1960s, was a response to the rise of American conservatism and anticommunism and took much influence from other countercultural movements like Zen Buddhism and the literary and cultural movement of the Beat Generation.[63] The Church of the SubGenius was then in turn influenced by Discordianism, and found its own roots in combating fundamentalist religion, as well as conservatism. As the social, cultural, and political climate of

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[61] "About – Questions and Answers," Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, accessed November 26, 2024, https://www.spaghettimonster.org/about/.

[62] "About – Questions and Answers," https://www.spaghettimonster.org/about/.

[63] Cusack, 14.

the United States continued to become even more turbulent, parody religions started popping up

everywhere.

One movement that prominently reflects the persistent challenging of American authority

and theology is the LBC, as their satirical preaching supplies an on the nose critique of

fundamental Christianity and, in turn, highlights a push towards secular thought. While creator

Chris Harper (otherwise known as his LBC persona Pastor Deacon Fred) may seem like a

character taken too far to where he believes what he had originally joked about, his preaching

has "long amused and entertained the cognoscenti among American Atheists and other

Freethought groups."[64] At a conference in 2005, Harper discussed Christian ideology, including

intelligent design theory, how American Republicanism identifies with Christianity but

frequently opposes the very principles that Christianity is based on, and how atheists attempt to

fit into Christian society but can be identified in a number of ways. Harper's mock sermons–

laden with anthropomorphized depictions of God's insecurity and hyperbolic praise for "True

Christians" in government–highlight the absurdities of combining faith with political power.[65]

Through the implication that divine power can be undermined by human choice, Harper's

preaching highlights the insecurity that is implied in doctrines that punish idolatry. By describing

atheist beliefs as "silly superstitions," Harper reveals the absurdity of denying established

knowledge and scientific methodologies. All throughout this speech, Harper as Deacon Fred not-

so-subtly makes it a point to be nothing but absurd; whether it be through the discussion of the

"talking snake theory," or saying that "JESUS CAN SEE YOU PEEKIN'" if someone's eyes are

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[64] Chris Harper, "The Deacon does Philly: an hysterical sermon of repentance delivered (deposited?) by 'Pastor Deacon Fred' of Landover Baptist Church at (onto?) the American Atheists 31st National Convention on Friday, March 25, 2005," *American Atheist Magazine*, Summer 2005, 19–22, Gale General OneFile (accessed November 23, 2024), https://s443-link-gale-com.libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/apps/doc/A139952018/ITOF?u=newpaltz&sid=bookmark-ITOF&xid=693fdb5d.
[65] Harper, "The Deacon does Philly," 20-1.

not closed while praying, Harper's point is explicitly made that organized religion can be just as ridiculous as any parody religion is viewed as.[66] Harper's performances as Deacon Fred expose the contradictions between Christian ideals and political practices, while his ironic attacks on the denial of science and evolution underscore the logical inconsistencies within some religious dogmas.

Similarly, the Church of Euthanasia uses outrageously provocative tactics to critique humanity's environmental destruction. Taking inspiration from the absurdity of COSG, the Church of Euthanasia revolves around its four pillars–suicide, abortion, cannibalism, and sodomy–and only follows its one commandment, "Thou shalt not procreate."[67] Founded by Chris Korda, the movement's radical principles offer a scathing criticism of industrialism and consumerism. Similarly to COSG's Jehovah-One coming to Ivan Stang in a dream, so too did "The Being" of the Church of Euthanasia appear and inform Korda that the overabundance of one species—Homo sapiens—is directly responsible for all aspects of the worsening global environmental disaster, including topsoil degradation, biodiversity loss, water and atmospheric pollution, and climate change.[68] These sentiments expressed by the Church of Euthanasia align with the progression that industrialism and consumerism has had on the planet, and though "voluntary forms of population reduction" are ludicrous, it is still worth examining the fact that this parody religion has been created in the first place and has continued to exist, whether it be through its website, or through other physical media, like vinyls or art exhibits.[69] Through dark humor, media hacking, and thought-provoking art and protest tactics, the Church of Euthanasia

[66] Harper, "The Deacon does Philly," 20 and 22.
[67] "A Brief History," The Church of Euthanasia, accessed November 26, 2024, https://www.churchofeuthanasia.org/history.html.
[68] "A Brief History," https://www.churchofeuthanasia.org/history.html.
[69] "A Brief History," https://www.churchofeuthanasia.org/history.html.
"The Church of Euthanasia Archives," Goswell Road, accessed November 26, 2024, https://goswellroad.com/program/the-church-of-euthanasia-archives-1.html.

connects environmental degradation with overpopulation, inviting an analysis about sustainability and human impact on the planet.[70] There is value in a parody religion that focuses on pointing out the precise ways in which people have ruined the environment in addition to criticizing the way that theology and conventional dogma are seen. By doing both, especially in extreme ways and sentiments, the Church of Euthanasia connects to broader ideas that link to more general cultural movements that enforce individualism, secularism, and skepticism.

While different in their motives, these two movements in particular demonstrate how parody religions go beyond simple mockery to address important cultural concerns like skepticism, secularism, and the moral inconsistencies of contemporary society. Their ridiculousness serves as a tool to encourage more in-depth thought about the systems they criticize rather than as an end in itself.

Along with promoting countercultural movements, parody religions also use rituals and doctrines in their own organization to create ways to imitate, invert, or exaggerate those of traditional religions. Consequently, these groups frequently question the inflexible structures of authority, faith, and dogma, offering an opportunity through which religious traditions and social conventions can be analyzed critically. In an effort to better comprehend the distinctions between satire and sincerity, satirical religious writings can be compared to those of mainstream religions in order to determine what qualifies as genuine belief.

While Discordianism did become somewhat of an interesting blend of a pagan religion mixed with its original humorous origins, its core texts still are composed of anarchic beliefs and inversions of different traditional theological beliefs. For example, a principle stated in the *Principia Discordia* claims that "IT IS MY FIRM BELIEF THAT IT IS A MISTAKE TO

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[70] "The Church of Euthanasia Archives," https://goswellroad.com/program/the-church-of-euthanasia-archives-1.html.

HOLD FIRM BELIEFS."[71] This particular phrase satirizes the tendency towards rigidity of traditional religious texts. By labeling firm beliefs as a "mistake," the *Principia Discordia* suggests that an insistence to keep the same rules and beliefs regarding religion leads to closed-mindedness. In contrast to the strict ideology of organized religion, Discordianism consistently promotes fluidity, individualism, and adaptation. Similarly, the *Principia Discordia* provides its readers with the following passage:

> Heaven is down. Hell is up.
> This is proven by the fact
> that the planets and stars
> are orderly in their
> movements,
> while down on earth
> we come close to the
> primal chaos.
> There are four other
> proofs,
> but I forget them.[72]

This passage reverses the traditional notion of Heaven being "up" and Hell being "down." By inverting this, Discordianism challenges the arbitrary concepts that are pushed by organized religion, all while reinforcing the supreme nature of chaos that Discordianism follows. The ending section exemplifies Discordian humor, and also mocks the formality of having "proofs" in religion in the first place. This ultimately undermines the authority of the existence of a proof, bringing back the "believe nothing" mantra that Discordianism encourages its followers to pursue. By blending wit with deeper philosophical commentary, the *Principia Discordia* embraces chaos, skepticism, and paradoxical scenarios to point out flaws in established religious doctrine and dogma.

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[71] "The Principia Discordia," accessed November 29, 2024, https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~tilt/principia/body.html.
[72] "The Principia Discordia," https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~tilt/principia/body.html.

Like Discordianism, COSG also provides over-the-top prose and verses that adhere to the ludicrous principles of its faith. From *The Book of the SubGenius* comes "The Prescriptures," which contains the doctrine, parables, and philosophy that SubGeniuses maintain. Within this text, COSG mimics mainstream religious origin stories about divinity, mirroring the structure and language used while also implementing their own absurdity and bawdiness. Specifically taking elements from the *Book of Revelation* and other apocalyptic writing, "The Prescriptures" depicts the deity of Jehovah-One as a god who is vengeful and petty rather than loving. By claiming that Jehovah-One is a god who would "urinate on the heads of Men," the text deliberately parodies how people that follow traditional religions, specifically Christianity, project trivial feelings onto divine beings through making their deity vindictive.[73] Similarly, by listing a plethora of divine names like Yahweh, Ra, Shiva, Odin, Ahriman, and Pan, among many others, the text asserts the interchangeable nature of gods across cultures and the adaptation of polytheistic beliefs into a monotheistic religion.[74] The claim that Jehovah-One's "names are eight hundred and / one and [his] names are / without number" further mocks the exclusivity of traditional religious naming, and suggests that attempting to set a limitation on just how many divinities there are to be worshipped is futile.[75] Even by placing a Lovecraftian entity like Nyarlothep amongst pagan and polytheistic deities, "The Prescriptures" asserts in a satirical way that what may seem sacred to some may be fictional and nonsensical to others. Much like their religion is viewed as a joke, COSG's principal text forces its readers to question why one god is taken more seriously than another.

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[73] "The Prescriptures," The Church of the SubGenius, accessed December 1, 2024, https://www.subgenius.com/bigfist/classic/classics/Prescriptures.html.

[74] "The Prescriptures," https://www.subgenius.com/bigfist/classic/classics/Prescriptures.html.

[75] "The Prescriptures," https://www.subgenius.com/bigfist/classic/classics/Prescriptures.html.

Compared to religions that are conventionally practiced, parody religions adopt entirely different methods of commanding and guiding its adherents. Through decentralizing leadership and leaving it up to constituents and subscribers to determine which parts resonate most with them, parody religions counteract the rigid doctrine, law, and theology that established religions demonstrate. Because the Church of Google takes its principles from the tech company and the search engine, it is no surprise that the religion is user-driven and user-promoted.[76] Unlike established religions, where leadership typically has a hierarchical structure and are the primary figureheads in controlling how a religion must be practiced, parody religions leave much of their interpretation up to their followers. This decentralization allows members to reinterpret core ideology initially implemented, ultimately encouraging self-expression rather than conformity.

Also relating to this idea is the emergence of prophets of what is shared in parody religions. These figures could typically be realistic, like Reverend Chris Korda of the Church of Euthanasia or Pastor Deacon Fred of the Landover Baptist Church. However, prophets also emerge as comedic and intentionally absurd figures; this can be seen in the creation of the SubGenius' prophet J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, who is the messenger of Jehovah-One. "Bob" may be seen to some as just a clipart illustration of a man smoking a pipe, but to others, "'Bob' is the still center of a turning world. He is the Angel of the Bottomless Pit, the Blood of the Lamb, the Paraclete of Coborca; 'THE KEY TO THE GATEWAY IS HIS PIPE.' 'Bob' is the Fool of the Universe and THUS, the only place of ALL KNOWLEDGE; 'Bob' is the meaning of the Word Without Meaning; therefore 'Bob' is the One True Word."[77] "Bob," while portrayed as a real person that "sweats, bleeds, suffers, just like anyone else," the fictional character that serves as

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[76] "Promote," The Reformed Church of Google, accessed December 1, 2024, https://churchofgoogle.org/promotional_campaign.html.
[77] Ivan Stang and SubGenius Foundation, *Book of the Subgenius* (1987; repr., Simon and Schuster, 2009).

COSG's prophet is not exactly portrayed as morally upright and deeply spiritual like prophets and preachers are thought to behave.[78] While "Bob" is certainly a dual figure of an average man and an incomprehensibly powerful being, this paradox that the *Book of the SubGenius* sets up further blurs the line between the humanization and deification of figures of worship. Essentially, the description of "Bob" and his divinity is meant to be confusing, and ultimately meaningless. By making "Bob" simultaneously everything and nothing, *Book of the SubGenius* and its corresponding texts asserts their belief in the absurd.

In a world where individuality and autonomy are valued, parody religions often resonate with those who find traditional religious belief to be too strict or outdated. The flexibility of the absurdity and ironic nature of parody religions ultimately reflects trends towards personal freedom and choosing one's own path in life, and the rise of movements such as parody religions reflect growing disillusionment with traditional religious institutions. Especially in the digital age, where information can be gathered by a quick search, those questioning mainstream theology and leaning towards a more secular view can still engage in dogma in various philosophical and humorous ways by implementing the teachings of a parody religion. The Internet provides a space to explore various beliefs through online communities and digitization of doctrine, and it is through the Web that individualistic thought thrives. No single experience on the Internet is ever the same, thus providing the perfect platform for parody religions; because their goals align so well with the vastness of being online, followers of parody religions can pick and choose elements of satirical beliefs rather than adhering to a strict doctrine. It becomes a utopia of sorts for those on the fringes wishing to engage with media that is both secular and religious at the same time.

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[78] Stang, *Book of the SubGenius*.

While the Internet greatly benefits parody religions in many ways, there may also be a challenge in maintaining cultural relevance, cohesion, and the efficacy of what original thoughts of parody religions initially set out to accomplish. The vastness of the Internet is both a blessing and a curse to parody religions. Though it helps maintain their ideology and allows for people to engage in these thoughts, the "virtual library aimed at organizing an infinite amount of information," as Paolo Bory proposed, ultimately leads to an overwhelming volume of memes, fads, and trends that disappear as quickly as they come about.[79] Parody religions depend on sustained engagement, and have done well in that, for the most part. However, the lack of attention span in the modern digital age makes it a challenge for long-lasting communities to be built and maintained. Various parody religions have declined over the years, leaving their websites and once-active forums to become desolate and void of any participants.[80] Online spaces also run the risk of becoming echo chambers, where certain voices dominate over others, ultimately defeating the purpose of the critiques that parody religions supply. Addressing these downsides, among other flaws that the Internet provides, is important in viewing the precarious line that parody religions walk between leveraging digital platforms for engagement while also avoiding becoming obsolete and just another trend.

Parody religions maintain an intriguing discussion of philosophy, humor, and community that, in one way or another, subvert conventional ideas of faith and social conventions. By adapting to trends, these movements offer flexible belief systems that resonate with those seeking out individuality and humor in faith. While their ideology thrives in an environment provided by the Internet due to their decentralized participation, this poses challenges of

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[79] Bory, 10.
[80] This can be especially seen in two lesser-known parody religions, namely Kiboism (http://www.kibo.com/main.shtml) and Matrixism (https://phosphoressence.tripod.com/).

maintaining relevance amongst rapid trends. Even with these problems, parody religions continue to be significant countercultural movements that, particularly in a postmodern era, offer an intriguing prism through which to view discussions about faith, secularism, and authority. Parody religions serve as a reminder that sometimes profound truths can be found not just through churches and temples, but perhaps instead through the absurd humor of a flying plate of spaghetti or a pipe-smoking prophet.

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