HA HA, ONLY SERIOUS:
A PRELIMINARY STUDY
OF JOKE RELIGIONS

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Abstract: Not all spiritual activity is commonly acknowledged as "religion." In a broad sense, religion is defined as the various ways humans negotiate their relationships with the transcendent, whether alone or in communities. The struggle to reconcile traditional pre-modern religious ideas about the world with the postmodern worldview, heavily influenced by the "deep play" that uses humor to break the hold of logic on the human mind, has given rise in the past sixty years to a new phenomenon: joke religions. A synthesis of occulture, counterculture, carnivalesque inversion, and vernacular reactions to institutional religions, joke religions are "authentic fakes" that are simultaneously authentic religions and humorous satires of other religions. They can be subdivided into satirical religions such as Discordianism—sincere religions, focused heavily on deep play, that can provide genuine religious experiences—and parody religions such as the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster—insincere, atheistic, extended parodies. Since there are virtually no scholarly works about joke religions as of yet, this paper is intended to be a starting point for future research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"Men laugh because God laughs."
Traci L. Slatton, *Immortal*

I. INTRODUCTION

Suppose someone approaches you and asks, "Did you know that God's name is Eris, and that He is a girl?" Such a strange question is likely to make you give a bewildered "No." Suppose that he then attempts to convince you of the truth of this statement by pointing out all of the confusion and chaos afflicting this world, asking, "Well, who do you think put all of that there, wise guy?" If you answer, "Impersonal forces," having already discovered that answering "God" will get you nowhere, he will agree and maintain that those impersonal forces are female and that Her name is Eris.[1]

Your next question is likely to be, "Are you *serious*?"

If you were to get a serious answer, it might go something like this: It seems natural to assume that religion has to be stable—perhaps even boring—to be real. But that is a false assumption, for though something that makes us laugh is not necessarily true, it is not necessarily false, either.[2]

This is the claim put forth by what I have chosen to call "satirical religions." A satirical religion is something that has all or many of the same elements of a religion, such as mythology, rituals, a divine object, and a community united by worship, but which does not take itself seriously—or rather, simultaneously does and does not take itself seriously.

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[1] *Principia Discordia, or: How I Found Goddess and What I Did to Her When I Found Her: The Magnum Opiate of Malaclypse the Younger, Wherein Is Explained Absolutely Everything Worth Knowing About Absolutely Anything* (Mason, MI: Loompanics Unlimited, 5th edition), p. 00065.

[2] Jason Truesdell, "Are you Serious?", The Center for Duck Studies, http://jagaimo.com/duck/docs _pp/serious.html, accessed 26 March 2009.

Adherents of satirical religions believe that the world is in bad shape, but that it is better to laugh than to cry about it. Indeed, as M. Conrad Hyers puts it, faith without laughter is dogmatism; laughter without faith—that is, cynicism—is despair.[3] It is the goal of satirical religions, using humor as their weapon, to restore the balance between these two extremes.

Suppose now that another person approaches you, claiming that the universe was created by a Flying Spaghetti Monster, and that the overwhelming scientific evidence for evolution was put in place by His Noodly Appendage in order to confuse us. There are many theories of Intelligent Design, she argues, and all of them should be given an equal chance in schools, including this one. Of course, when discussing Pastafarianism, the teacher should wear full pirate regalia, His chosen costume—it would be disrespectful not to.

Pastafarianism is not a satirical religion but a parody religion. Adherents of parody religions tend to believe that religions such as Christianity—Intelligent Design, in the case of Pastafarianism—have overwhelmingly tipped Hyers's scale on the side of faith without laughter, or dogmatism. To balance the scale, parody religions have placed themselves on the opposite end—that of laughter without faith, or cynicism. In contrast to satirical religions, parody religions take neither themselves nor their opponents

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[3] "The Comic Profanation of the Sacred," in *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*, ed. M. Conrad Hyers (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 24.

seriously. While adherents of satirical religions may be playful believers, adherents of parody religions are overwhelmingly likely to be playful atheists.

It is very important to distinguish between parody religions and satirical religions. As of early 2009, the term "parody religion" (or "joke religion") still encompasses both of them in common usage, making no distinction between cynicism and the possibility, at least, of real faith. (In the meantime, I will use "joke religion" to encompass both.) It is evident from a 2005 discussion about parody religions (in the undifferentiated sense of the term) on Wikipedia that the distinction is necessary. A user identified as Diamantina asked, "In general, what are the serious beliefs of members of parody religions?" Solipsist responded: "Nearly all parody religions exist to poke fun at established religions or society. As such few if any of them any have any serious beliefs or systems of ethics." Diamantina retorted, "Although parody religions *as such* do not have serious beliefs or systems of ethics, I assume that people who belong to parody religions have serious ethical and moral beliefs—it is hard to be a conscious human being without *some* kind of ethical and moral beliefs."[4] Assuming that these beliefs exist in adherents of parody religions separately from the parody religions themselves, the question is, then, can *satirical* religions really provide for these beliefs?

Such is the question that pervades this paper. While I cannot hope to come to any definitive answer within the limits of this paper, the discussion contained herein will

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[4] "Talk:Parody religion," Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Parody_religion>, accessed 27 March 2009.

provide a starting point for future research. First I will put forth the arguments of various

authoritative academic works that attempt to define religion and the arguments of a

number of other works, both academic and religious, that examine the role of humor in

religion. Thus prepared, I will explain in detail the nature of parody and satirical

religions, then sketch the histories and worldviews of the most well-known and most

fully developed: the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and Discordianism,

respectively. A similar but briefer discussion of several other joke religions will serve to

further illustrate similarities and differences. I will then analyze the patterns that are

revealed, in light of the previous theoretical discussion.

Though some joke religions were created or have developed in foreign countries, I will

focus exclusively on the United States. Its virtual and physical space seem to be the

home of the great majority of joke religions, and its popular culture the source material

for their satires. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the United States seems to

be subject to a bias, inspired by its Protestant heritage, that faith is more significant than

ritual practice. Joke religions, meanwhile, simultaneously display a heavy emphasis on

the practices specific to the religions and are engaged in a dialogue with non-adherents

about whether adherents "really" believe in the respective joke religions.

More questions are raised than answered by this paper. Future research should include

deeper investigation into the differences between satirical and parody religions and into

the question of faith (in what sense do adherents believe in their satirical religions, if at

all? does lack of faith mean parody religions are not religions?), as well as discussion of

the role of the Internet (which is the primary medium through which joke religions are

spread), and the intersection and/or parallel development of joke religions, occulture, and

secular counterculture in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, research

should be done not only through a religious studies lens but through a folkloric lens,

developing in particular an analysis of the role of ritual and subculture in joke religions,

and the parallels between joke religions and the concept of carnivalesque.

Above all, future research should include fieldwork. I believe that participant

observation (or, at the very least, an extended discussion of an emic [insider's] view of

parody or satirical religions, contrasted with an etic [academic, or outsider's] view) is

essential to understanding these religions. This can be done in the physical world, by

personal interviews or attending gatherings such as Church of the SubGenius Devivals, or

in the virtual world of the Internet, where, for the most part, these religions live.

Unfortunately, the limitations of this paper preclude any fieldwork. There is a plethora of

primary source material available, both in print and on the "official" and unofficial

websites of each religion, to the researcher conversant in the ways of joke religions. I

have chosen to analyze these documents in order to establish the beginnings of an

academic discussion of parody and satirical religions; fieldwork can (and hopefully will)

follow.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Before delving into the history and worldview of several satirical and parody religions, I will discuss the nature of religion and the role of humor in religion. These definitions will provide the foundation on which to build a basic understanding of joke religions.

A. *Defining religion*

Religion can be virtually anything: a group of ascetics shutting off their physical senses to better focus on the world of the transcendent; wild parties in which music and dancing are the sparks that ignite the fire of possession by gods or spirits; an introverted man or woman studying holy texts and praying alone. Yet some kinds of spiritual activity are not allowed the status of "religion" in the popular imagination or among academics. Various African tribal religions, for instance, were until relatively recently dismissed as mere "superstitions"; people still argue over whether or not "cults," such as the People's Temple of Jim Jones, are religions or, somehow, something less.[5] What then is "religion" and how do people decide what falls under its umbrella?

David Chidester, the only academic as of early 2009 who has made more than just a brief mention in print of joke religions, points out that classic definitions of religion tend to focus either on a way of thinking, a way of feeling, or a way of being in society. Religion

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[5] David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 17.

as a way of thinking focuses on how the human mind engages with the transcendent (a broad term for the ultimate or divine power pervading the universe), defining a cosmic moral order and identifying the difference between human and the supernatural Other, between sacred and profane. As a way of feeling, religion deals with intense emotions relating to the link between the human mind and the Other. The beliefs and symbolic systems that arise from thinking and feeling about the sacred object of worship play an important role in shaping the religious practices and social organization of humans.[6] In short, "religion" refers to the ways in which humans, whether alone or in communities, interact with the transcendent.[7] We will deal with the transcendent first, then move on to its relationships with individuals and with groups.

The divine—God, Allah, Brahman, Tao, the collective unconscious, or whatever one wishes to call the transcendent—is ineffable, numinous, "an infinite, universal field of inconceivable dimensions."[8] The sociologist Peter Berger calls it "a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside"[9] and occasionally to manifest in certain persons or objects, such as a prophet or a burning bush. These people or things in which the divine power manifests ("hierophants"[10]), are sacred, protected and isolated from the rest of the world by prohibitions or "taboos"; "profane things are those things to which such prohibitions

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[6] Chidester, pp. 15-16.

[7] Chidester, p. 2.

[8] Georg Feuerstein, *Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Radical Teachings of Crazy-Wise Adepts, Holy Fools, and Rascal Gurus* (New York, NY: Penguin/Arkana, 1990), p. 172.

[9] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), p. 26.

[10] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion: The significance of religious myth, symbolism, and ritual within life and culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 201.

apply and which must keep their distance from that which is sacred." [11]   This

dichotomization of reality provides the basis for, in Clifford Geertz's phrase, a "general

order of existence"[12] by which the universe is thought to sustain itself. The focus on the

transcendent and the prohibitions regarding it, though, applies to both magic and religion;

what then distinguishes the two? According to Émile Durkheim, magic is a solitary act

intended to influence the world with the power of one's will, whereas religion is

collective, an aggregate of unique individuals or sects with very similar beliefs and/or

practices relating to the transcendent for its own sake.[13]

Religion provides a social way of being in the world, a "community of allegiance,"[14]

through the establishment of either rigid, hierarchical religious institutions or loosely

affiliated networks of religious people who share practices and beliefs, or something in

between the two. Durkheim, in his definition of religion, claims that the unified system

of symbols, beliefs, and practices relating to the transcendent unites adherents "in a single

moral community called a church."[15] Though this definition applies to most of

Christianity and can be adapted for other institutional religions, a broader characterization

of religious communities is more useful for our purposes. Neo-paganism (or even, to

some degree, Hinduism), for example, is comprised of networks of adherents "who

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[11] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Reading, Berkshire: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 40.

[12] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), p. 90.

[13] Durkheim, pp. 42, 45.

[14] Chidester, p. 33.

[15] Durkheim, pp. 40, 46.

interact at festivals, on the Internet, and at open rituals, and most of those who have read the same seminal books and share, at least broadly, similar rituals and myths."[16]

Indeed, individuals often interact with the transcendent in ways directed and authorized by religious officials—those people with representative positions in religious institutions who claim to know God's will, such as shamans or priests—but they also do so in ways *not* authorized by religious officials. Though it is the ideas of people of faith that inform and develop religious institutions and the sacred dramas enacted in religious rituals, there is, according to folklorist Leonard Primiano, a difference between institutional religion and vernacular religion—"religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it." Devotion to the Virgin Mary, for example, is an important part of many Catholics' lives, but is not authorized by the Catholic Church. Folklorists study vernacular religion through its contextual manifestations, the "verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief."[17] As we shall later see, given the creativity and expressiveness of the people who tend to be attracted to joke religions, the lens of vernacular religion will be useful for looking at the ways in which joke religions interact with established religions such as Christianity, and how individuals publicly express their adherence to joke religions.

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[16] Helen A. Berger, Evan A. Leach, and Leigh S. Shaffer, *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 202.
[17] Primiano, Leonard Norman, "Religion, Folk," in *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, Vol. 2, ed. Tom Green (ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1997), p. 714.

We can now define religion as the various ways in which humans interact with the transcendent. The transcendent is sacred and is divided from the profane by prohibitions that shape human ritual practices and social organizations. Whether these organizations are rigid hierarchies or loose networks, their religious beliefs and rituals are usually adapted and subtly transformed by people for their own spiritual purposes.

Over the last several centuries, changes in religion have emerged that laymen and scholars are still puzzling over. Though some say that the religious myths and symbols that have shaped human lives for millennia are being abandoned,[18] I believe they are in fact undergoing a profound transformation. Many people, recognizing that pre-modern ideas about tradition, space, identity, community, and the body no longer apply to these times, are re-evaluating and transforming those ideas; others, reacting against this re-evaluation, attempt to return to idealized pre-modern sensibilities. Pluralism—the recognition that there is a wide spectrum of beliefs in the world, and that one can pick and choose from among them—is becoming more prevalent, as is the importance of privacy in religious rituals and beliefs. In this postmodern world, writes Jeremy Carrette, sacred space is no longer delimited solely by religious institutions, but is "contested and relocated according to the politics of individual experience." Tradition and space have become commodities, enabling anyone to purchase spiritual identities. In postmodern spirituality, Carrette continues,

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[18] That is, that we no longer need myths or religious symbols, since the history and worldview provided by science is replacing them. Christopher Partridge, ed., *New Religions: A Guide: New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 358.

> the transcendent is either seen as present in the immanent or as a false division, making creation divine…The old religious certainties are dissolved and rediscovered in the cinema, the shopping mall and the music of Madonna. Some would argue that this reflects the domination of capitalism; others, that the mass-produced and the material have taken on important spiritual value. [19]

In either case, religion is making a place for itself in the newly secular domain, primarily through the vernacular practices of Westerners who are no longer satisfied with traditional religion.

Edward Bailey's concept of "implicit religion" will be useful for looking at this postmodern spirituality. Similar to Robert Ellwood's "excursus religion,"[20] Thomas Luckmann's "invisible religion," and Paul Tillich's "ultimate concern," the phrase was chosen in 1969 to replace "secular religion," which referred to the expression of "a religiosity that is independent of any recognized system."[21] Bailey writes that there are three aspects of implicit religions: commitments; "integrating focuses," which suggest that "the 'body' that has the implicit religion may be an individual or a group"; and "intensive concerns with extensive effects," which suggest that a commitment, however fervently articulated, "must be expressed in wider ways if it is to qualify as an implicit religion and not just as a hobby." The concept of implicit religion avoids the assumption that "people have a religion that is internally integrated and comprehensively all-embracing—in other words, that they only have one religion," and allows for the conviction that "human behavior is generally characterized by mixed motives, incomplete

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[19] Jeremy Carette, "Postmodern Spirituality," in Partridge, *New Religions*, p. 363-364.
[20] In Berger, pp. 33-34.
[21] Edward Bailey, "Implicit Religion," in Partridge, *New Religions*, p. 397.

understandings and even contradictory intentions."[22] As we will see, this confused,

contradictory state of being is fundamental to the mindset of adherents of joke religions,

who may in fact have more than one religion.

People who want to interact with the transcendent must struggle with the conflict

between their inherited pre-modern ideas about religion and their individualistic,

postmodern sensibilities. This conflict has emerged in a new form, complete with

paradoxes, mixed motives, and contradictory intentions: that of satirical and parody

religions.

B. *The role of humor in religion*

William James, acknowledged by many as the father of the field of religious studies,

wrote, "Religion signifies always a serious state of mind."[23] The very thought of

laughing at anything relating to holy matters seems disrespectful, even blasphemous.

It is a little-acknowledged fact, however, that humor has a long and profound history in

relation to religion. From the fools for Christ's sake to the crazy adepts of Tibet and the

Zen masters of China and Japan, from the carnivalesque festivals of Europe in the Middle

Ages to the trickster gods of every polytheistic society, spiritual humor has occupied the

liminal space between the sacred and the profane[24] throughout human history. To reveal

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[22] Bailey, in Partridge, *New Religions*, p. 396.
[23] Quoted in Chidester, p. 1.
[24] Hyers, "The Comic Profanation of the Sacred," in *Holy Laughter*, p. 23.

the nature of the relationship between humor and religion, we will first look at the

functions of humor on its own.

Laughter is therapeutic to humans. As Walter Nash shows, it is an essential tool for

living in the world:

> Humor is a specifying characteristic of humanity…It is a complex piece of
> equipment for living, a mode of attack and a line of defense, a method of
> raising questions and criticizing arguments, a protest against the inequality
> of the struggle to live, a way of atonement and reconciliation, a treaty with
> all that is willful, impaired, beyond our power to control.[25]

More to the point, according to Freud, laughing demonstrates one's invulnerability to and

rebellion against the world and the pain that comes from trying to live in it.[26] By

laughing specifically at an "other," someone who refuses to fall in line with one's

worldview, one integrates him into that worldview and thereby neutralizes the threat that

he represents to the psyche.[27] On the other hand, as Donald Capps writes, "joking may

be the closest some get to a sense of community." Sharing a joke indicates that the teller

and the audience share a similar outlook on and response to the quirks of life, which

helps to establish a sense of shared identity.[28]

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[25] Walter Nash, *The Language of Humor: Style and Technique in Comic Discourse* (New York, NY: Longman Group Limited, 1985), p. 1.

[26] In Donald Capps, *A Time to Laugh: The Religion of Humor* (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), p. 11.

[27] Patrick Laude, *Divine Play, Sacred Laughter, and Spiritual Understanding* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 118.

[28] Capps, pp. 69, 80, 90.

In addition to contributing to a sense of identity and community, humor functions to release the social pressures of normative society.[29] Criticizing prominent figures and political structures, as media pundits like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert do, or inverting social roles, as in the medieval Feast of Fools and in today's Mardi Gras celebrations, entails the use of startling, even offensive, humor. It suggests a temporary rejection of authority—political or religious—that people would not otherwise be likely to question. Johan Haizinga calls this "deep play," that is, "play that has as one of its aspects the questioning and restructuring of social arrangements."[30] In a religious sense, this sort of humor uses folly to liberate people from what "crazy-wise adepts" believe to be the confines of illusion, to melt down all the "'golden calves' of the mind."[31] As we will soon see, this sort of humor is the hallmark of all joke religions.

Though most people associate humor with disrespect or blasphemy, and seriousness with a certain sense of sacrality, laughter is fundamentally religious. As we have seen, religion focuses on ideas about tradition, space, identity, community, and the body, all of which rest upon the foundation of the separation of sacred and profane. Through "deep play" and the role of joking in the formation of identity and community, spiritual laughter questions the ideas and institutions that religion has helped form. On a simple level, the mythology of every culture, for example, has trickster gods or heroes, whose duty it is to teach moral and social lessons by counter-example. The Hindu child-god Krishna, for example, invites several young women who are bathing in a stream to come out without

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[29] Laude, p. 95.
[30] In Berger, p. 99.
[31] Georg Feuerstein, *Holy Madness* (New York, NY: Arkana, 1990), p. 52.

their clothes. The young women protest, but eventually agree and come out of the stream

naked. This shocking story is likely to prompt disbelieving laughter, but it symbolizes

Krishna's invitation to human souls to discard their bodies, which are as transitory as

clothing, and join Him in the light of *moksha*, or nirvana. On a deeper level, according to

Patrick Laude, laughter coincides with a spiritual realization which abruptly "breaks the

shell of ordinary consciousness," bringing one into deeper contact with the transcendent.

Thus we have the legend of the laughing Buddha, or Zen masters who give their students

riddles designed precisely to make the student realize the "disproportion between one's

conceptual and verbal utterances and the reality of one's being." [32]

According to Ignacio L. Götz, spiritual humor is effective because it utilizes paradox,

which shares the same structure as faith. Faith is not a logical thing: it is, to put it

bluntly, a blind belief in the preposterous.[33] Like paradox, faith (or its referent) is

impossible and true at the same time. Both faith and the "deep play" that "melts down

the 'golden calves' of the mind" work to break the hold of logic so that we can see reality

as it really is. Indeed, laughter works not only for individual minds but also for societies.

Like Hyers's scale with cynicism on one end and dogmatism on the other, Götz writes

that there is a delicate balance between the tyranny of holiness and the anarchy of

humor.[34] This balance is the core of the relationship between religion and spiritual

laughter.

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[32] Laude, p. 125.

[33] Ignacio L. Götz, *Faith, Humor, and Paradox* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), pp. 33-34.

[34] Götz, p. 6.

C. *Defining satirical and parody religions*

Joke religions fall in the middle of Götz's and Hyers's scales. They apply postmodern ideas about society, identity, and the body to spiritual thoughts and feelings, add a liberal dose of both spiritual and profane humor, and come up with something entirely new. By engaging the audience in thought experiments and perceptual games about authenticity and fakery, joke religions work to point out the oddities of religion and popular culture, and to transform society's structures while simultaneously working within them. Joke religions can be subdivided into two categories: satirical religions, which can do sincere spiritual work, and parody religions, which are insincere, extended parodies of other religions.

The roots of joke religions seem to lie in the seeds sown by the intersection of Eastern and Western religious philosophy in the late nineteenth century. Swami Vivekananda, who taught Westerners that all religions are essentially one and that a person could be a Hindu and a Christian at the same time and spiritually benefit from it, contributed a great deal to the now-common perception of India as spiritually superior to the West.[35] Using these Spiritualist ideas as a foundation for her Theosophy movement, the Russian psychic Madame H.P. Blavatsky solidly established a mixture of Eastern and Western religious philosophy as the basis for the great majority of occult groups that were soon to come into being. Throughout the course of the twentieth century, occult (referring to "hidden knowledge," i.e., magic) groups, drawing on the existing blend of philosophies and

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[35] Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge University Press), p. 258.

adding medieval and early modern mysticisms, became more and more popular, because

they were attractively mysterious and tended to draw those who were not satisfied with

traditional religion. Christopher Partridge writes that "occulture," the linking and

dissemination of these mystical, alternative spiritual theories and practices with popular

culture, is becoming "less exotic and [therefore] more plausible to increasing numbers of

people."

> …Occulture, on the whole, stands over against mainstream Christian
> religion and spirituality, encourages countercultural attitudes, tends to
> support conspiracy theories about the darkside of the mainstream and is,
> therefore, invested with significant kudos and popular authority.[36]

Occulture is today manifest in intensely popular things such as horoscopes and astrology,

TV shows like "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," books like *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan

Brown, and so on.

One of the trendiest expressions of occulture to date, and the most significant for joke

religions, is that of the neo-pagan/witchcraft movement. Beginning in the early 1950s, an

Englishman named Gerald Gardner claimed (falsely) that he had discovered a coven, or

group, of witches who had inherited their spiritual and magical practices and beliefs from

the paganism of pre-historic Europe. Gardner proceeded to cobble together a

reconstruction of European paganism and the initiatory rites, organization, and Eastern-

inspired trappings of occult groups like Aleister Crowley's Thelema. This new

spirituality, broadly called neo-paganism or witchcraft (or, more specifically referring to

the Gardnerian tradition, Wicca) gave rise to a series of increasingly trendy traditions and

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[36] Partridge, pp. 6, 8.

offshoots, particularly when it traveled to the United States in the late 1950s or early

1960s. At approximately the same time, subconsciously inspired by fairytales and the

impending prospect of global nuclear annihilation, people began claiming that they had

seen and/or been abducted by UFOs; consciously inspired by an increasing sense of

globalization and in protest against the current political situation, other people began

rejecting the cultural norms of their parents by growing long hair, protesting the war in

Vietnam, producing shockingly psychedelic music and art, and cultivating an interest in

astrology and the "New Age," thus blurring the line between mysticism and politics.[37] It

was into the midst of this postmodern re-evaluation of traditional ideas and norms in the

late 1950s and early 1960s that Discordianism, the first satirical religion, emerged.

Satirical and parody religions developed in accord with what Agehananda Bharati calls

the "pizza effect." The original pizza was a hot baked bread exported to America,

embellished, and returned to Italy, where it became a national dish[38]; similarly, the first

joke religions cobbled together numerous aspects of popular culture, occulture, and

counterculture; synthesized them with postmodern ideas about religion; and are now

subtly transforming religion in the United States. Joke religions are, in effect, a synthesis

of and a vernacular reaction to both institutional religions, such as Christianity, and the

more loosely defined "institutional" occult and counterculture groups, such as neo-

paganism.

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[37] Berger, pp. 86-88.
[38] Flood, p. 267.

David Chidester—the only scholar so far, as noted above, to publish anything more than

a passing mention of joke religions—calls joke religions "authentic fakes." They are

authentic because they negotiate the politics of being human in relation to the divine,

which is essentially how I have defined religion, but are also explicit parodies of

religion—"simultaneously simulations and the real thing."[39] Stephen M. Fjellman, who

shows that there is a difference between real real, fake real, real fake, and fake fake

things in his discussion of Disneyland, clarifies this point:

> fake fake things…are the stuff of fantasy and commerce…As an animated
> character, Mickey is a real fake; as portrayed by a cast member, he is a
> fake fake. As children know, this fake fake is more real than the real fake.
> Just listen to them cry, 'Look, it's *really* Mickey!'…We know objects are
> ersatz…but the fakes are authentic in the way (we have been taught) only
> Disney can make them.[40]

Indeed, to some, Disney—with recruiting clubs, adherents, temples (theme parks), and

worship meetings (e.g. MouseFest)—*is* a religion.[41] But, though "Disneyism" is

certainly an authentic fake, I do not consider it, or even groups like the Church of Elvis,

which do provide genuine religious experiences in the context of their worship of a

secular object, a joke religion. Satirical (sincere) joke religions and parody (insincere)

joke religions focus on religious or spiritual fakery, rather than on a secular person or

idea. The Church of the Invisible Pink Unicorn, for example, is a parody religion rather

than a religious obsession with a secular object because its explicit intention is to combat

the idea that God is an invisible, omnipresent being, rather than to worship an invisible

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[39] Chidester, pp. *viii-ix*.
[40] Stephen M. Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (Oxford, England: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 255-256.
[41] Cory Doctorow, "Disney as a religion, the college course," Boing Boing, http://boingboing.net/2007/12/17/disney-as-a-religion.html, retrieved 5 May 2009.

pink unicorn that might as well be an invisible purple pen, for all we know. In short,

"Disneyism" is focused on a religious expression of a *secular* thing, while the Church of

the Invisible Pink Unicorn is devoted to negotiating the human relationship with the

divine (or, in their view, the lack of it): this is the dividing line between the broad

category of authentic fakes and the more specific category of joke religions.

Many people consider joke religions "fakes" because of their use of startling, even

offensive, humor. As we have seen, however, religious humor is a form of "deep play"

that works to renegotiate ideas about tradition, space, identity, community, and the body,

and uses paradox to further one's progress toward enlightenment. The humor of joke

religions is in fact a manifestation of the folkloric principle of the carnivalesque: in John

Fiske's words, the carnival is a domain that abides by certain rules, but which "inverts

those rules and builds a world upside down, one structured according to the logic of the

'inside out' that provides 'a parody of the extracarnival life."[42] Carnival temporarily

releases the body from its social definition and control, suspending all rank and privilege

to reveal that on both a spiritual and an intensely physical level, all people are equal.

There are three forms of carnival: ritual spectacles, comic compositions ("inversions,

parodies, travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and uncrownings"), and

curses or oaths[43]; as we will see, joke religions are most definitely carnivalesque in the

second sense. Carnival is known today by several names, perhaps the most well-known

of which is culture jamming, an "artistic 'terrorism' directed against the information

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[42] Fiske, John, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 82.
[43] Fiske, pp. 83-84.

society in which we live…on its most profound level, [it] is about remaking reality."[44]

Sniggle.net, "The Culture Jammer's Encyclopedia," defines culture jamming as "pranks

and hoaxes and delusions and frauds" that remind us that

> we're easily fooled and that we aren't nearly as smart as we sometimes
> think we are. The trickster, by taking us down a notch, does us a valuable
> service. It's when we start acting clever that we summon forth the worst of
> humanity's evils.[45]

Most joke religions see people who take themselves too seriously, people who are most

likely to be offended by the admixture of religion and humor, as dangerous and therefore

as their targets. Joke religions are, in essence, "engaged in an elaborate and self-

conscious act of social construction: creating a purposefully postmodern, relativist,

irreverent and humorous system of religious ideas." The central premise of Thee Church

ov MOO [sic], for example, is that "paradox and radical self-contradiction are…the most

reasonable way to approach the Absolute." Lorne Dawson writes,

> It is difficult to determine if MOOism is a 'religious' movement or just a
> sophisticated hoax. Certainly the objective is to have fun with religion.
> But the substantial and ongoing investment of time and energy suggest a
> more serious and significant underlying impulse of spiritual
> experimentation in response to an ever more skeptical and sophisticated
> social context.[46]

Joke religions unite religion and carnival in the study of what it means to be human in

this postmodern world, religion by negotiating with the divine, carnival by counter-

example and the rules of sacred paradox.

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[44] Mark Dery, "The Merry Pranksters And the Art of the Hoax," *New York Times*, Sunday, December 23, 1990, http://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/23/arts/the-merry-pranksters-and-the-art-of-the-hoax.html, retrieved 4 April 2009.

[45] Sniggle.net, http://sniggle.net/about.php, retrieved 4 April 2009.

[46] Lorne Dawson, "Thee Church ov MOO," in Partridge, *New Religions*, p. 408.

To summarize, satirical religions are real fakes that are able to provide real religious experience and, as we will see, have all the trappings of real religions (mythology, divine beings, rituals, saints, community, a worldview explaining the difference between sacred and profane, etc.); parody religions have the same trappings and perhaps can provide for the inherent human need for spirituality, but their intention is to point out the flaws in the religions that they are mocking.

III. SURVEY OF JOKE RELIGIONS

A. *Discordianism: A Satirical Religion*

Discordianism is in all likelihood the first of the joke religions. Founded in the late 1950s, it combines Greco-Roman mythology, conspiracy theory, cognitive dissonance, and various aspects of American pop culture and counterculture into a carnivalesque religion with a strong affinity for the absurd, whimsical, and grotesque. Though Discordianism is emphatically decentralized and disorganized, many of its members share similar practices, the most prominent of which is reality hacking (i.e. culture jamming, the subversion of people's paradigms in order to shock them into looking at the world in a new way). Many Discordians are quite sincere in their beliefs.

i. *History, Publications, and Organization*

According to *The Principia Discordia*, the "Discordian Bible," Discordianism began in an all-night bowling alley in southern California in 1957. Two friends, known in the *Principia* as Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst and Malaclypse the Younger or Mal-2, sat sipping coffee and discussing the confusion of their personal lives. When one of them named chaos and strife as the root of all confusion, they "experienced a dramatic break in the space-time continuum":[47]

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[47] Chidester, p. 198.

Suddenly the place became devoid of light. Then an utter silence enveloped them, and a great stillness was felt. Then came a blinding flash of intense light, as though their very psyches had gone nova. Then vision returned.

Everything around them appeared to be frozen in time. A chimpanzee walked upright into the room, carrying a scroll that depicted a yin-yang symbol with an apple on one side and a pentagon on the other (illustration below). He asked,

"Gentlemen…why does Pickering's Moon go about in reverse orbit? Gentlemen, there are nipples on your chests; do you give milk? And what, pray tell, Gentlemen, is to be done about Heisenberg's Law?" He paused. "SOMEBODY HAD TO PUT ALL OF THIS CONFUSION HERE!"

He subsequently exploded, and time returned to normal. Omar and Mal-2 spent five days researching the meaning of the symbol on the scroll; on the fifth night, they traced the writing on the apple to the Greek goddess Eris, known to the Romans as Discordia. That night each of them dreamt of the goddess, who revealed to them that the principle of chaos, which is still treated as negative, is just as significant as the principle of order. Eris is the source not only of "discord, conflict, and chaos…but also of the 'happy anarchy' of freedom, creativity, and laughter."[48]
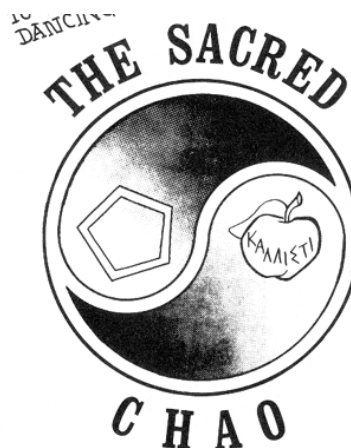
"What is this?" mumbled one to the other, "A religion based on The Goddess of Confusion? It is utter madness!"
And with those words, each looked at the other in absolute awe. Omar began to giggle. Mal began to laugh. Omar began to jump up and down. Mal was hooting and hollering to beat all hell. And amid squeals of mirth and with tears on their cheeks, each appointed the other to be high priest of his own madness, and

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[48] Chidester, p. 198.

together they declared themselves to be a society of Discordia, for what ever that may turn out to be.[49]

The two friends who claimed to have experienced the revelation of the goddess Eris were named Kerry Wendell Thornley and Greg Hill (Omar and Mal-2, respectively). Very little is known about Greg Hill (1941-2000),[50] although the Discordian author Robert Anton Wilson, in a 1990 lecture, described him as the head of a computer facility owned by one of the largest banks in the United States.[51] Kerry Thornley (1938-1998), however, was much more of a public figure. Around the time he and Hill wrote the *Principia Discordia,* Thornley served briefly in the U.S. Marine Corps alongside Lee Harvey Oswald,[52] which got Thornley into a great deal of trouble when Oswald killed President Kennedy (contrary to popular opinion at the time, Thornley had nothing to do with it). The rest of his life he spent publishing various books and articles relating to counterculture and conspiracy theories under a variety of pen names.[53]

After Thornley and Hill finally published the *Principia* in 1963—the print run consisted of five Xerox copies[54]—it went through a number of increasingly popular editions, culminating in the early 1970s in the combined fourth and fifth editions (the latter is a

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[49] *Principia Discordia*, pp. 14-17.

[50] "Rememberence – Greg Hill," alt.discordia.scc, http://groups.google.com/group/alt.discordia.scc/browse_thread/thread/25f571774b7b2003/f05d32875321aae9, retrieved 21 March 2009.

[51] Robert Anton Wilson, "The I in the Triangle," Greylodge Podcasting Company (Santa Cruz, CA: 1990), http://www.greylodge.org/gpc/?p=693, retrieved 21 March 2009.

[52] "Kerry Wendell Thornley," Warren Commission Hearings Vol. XI, p. 84, http://www.history-matters.com/archive/jfk/wc/wcvols/wh11/html/WC_Vol11_0047b.htm, retrieved 21 March 2009.

[53] "Kerry Wendell Thornley," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerry_Thornley, retrieved 21 March 2009.

[54] Kristin Buxton, "The Lifecycle of the *Principia Discordia*," The Lazarus Corporation, http://www.lazaruscorporation.co.uk/v4/articles/principiadiscordia.php, accessed 21 March 2009.

single page appended to the former). It was not until 1979 that Loompanics Unlimited, an American publisher specializing in unconventional titles, took the *Principia* and began to distribute it outside California.[55] A number of other publishers have since taken advantage of the "All Rights Reversed" copyright (or, as it appears in the *Principia*, the Kopyleft). Hill explained in 1980: "[The *Principia*] was an experiment and was intended to be an underground work and that involves a different set of ethics than commercial work."[56] This "broken copyright," in all likelihood conceived of by Thornley and Hill, indicates that the work is in the public domain, free and available for anyone to do with it what they will.

The 1960s seem to have been a period of formation for Discordianism, strongly influenced by the successively more popular versions of the *Principia Discordia* put out by Thornley and Hill. Margot Adler, a prominent scholar of the neo-pagan movement, writes that a number of Discordian cabals formed in the 1960s: "At one point there were rumored to be more than twenty, although some may have had a membership of only one…Most of these cabals engaged in various nonviolent, absurdist, revolutionary, magical, and surrealist endeavors."[57] According to another authority, "There were several Discordian newsletters written in the 1960s, and several Discordian members wrote for the underground press in various parts of the country." Little other information about Discordianism in this decade remains.

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[55] Michael Woods, "From Underground to Internet: The *Principia Discordia*," Conventional Chaos, http://www.conventionalchaos.com/archive/fnord/index.html, accessed 21 March 2009.
[56] Quoted in Buxton.
[57] Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshipers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (New York, NY: Penguin/Arkana, 1997), p. 347.

Discordianism in the 1970s was suddenly popularized by a new player on the scene:

Robert Anton Wilson (1932-2007). In 1968 or 1969 Wilson and Robert Shea, both

editors at *Playboy* magazine, came up with the idea for a novel based on the (fictional)

Discordian Society. In Wilson's words:

> We felt the Society needed some opposition, because the whole idea of it
> is based on conflict and dialectics. So, we created an opposition within the
> Discordian Society, which we called the Bavarian Illuminati. We got the
> idea from the John Birch Society and various other right-wing groups who
> believe that the Illuminati really run the world…So, we built up this myth
> about the warfare between the Discordian Society and the Illuminati for
> quite a while, until one day Bob Shea said to me, "You know, we could
> write a novel about this!" The rest is history.[58]

Interestingly enough, in 1991, Kerry Thornley claimed that it was *he* and Wilson who in

1968 had "decided to form a conspiracy with no purpose - so that investigators would

never be able to figure out what it was doing…We decided to call that conspiracy,

however unoriginally, the Bavarian Illuminati—a caper that culminated eventually in the

Illuminatus! Trilogy."[59] Whether or not this claim is true, it was Wilson and Shea who

wrote the novel between 1969 and 1971; Dell published it in 1975[60] in three volumes:

The Eye In the Pyramid, The Golden Apple, and *Leviathan*. *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*, the

omnibus version, was published ten years later and dedicated to Thornley and Hill.

Steeped in various aspects of counterculture such as conspiracy theory, sex, drugs, music,

libertarianism, cognitive dissonance, satire, and science fiction, the novel is a wild, highly

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[58] Jeffrey Elliot, "Robert Anton Wilson: Searching for Cosmic Intelligence," *Starship: The Magazine About Science Fiction*, http://www.rawilsonfans.com/articles/Starship.htm, retrieved 22 March 2009.

[59] Kerry Thornley, "Fifth Edition Introduction" (IllumiNet Press, 1999), http://www.ology.org/principia/intro5.html, retrieved 21 March 2009.

[60] Robert Anton Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger I: The Final Secret of the Illuminati* (1977), p. 145.

entertaining, and often confusing ride through a Discordian worldview. Wilson and Shea

never collaborated again: Shea went on to write action novels, and Wilson continued to

produce counterculture favorites, including sequels to and elaborations of *Illuminatus!*.

The increasingly popular works of Robert Anton Wilson and, beginning in 1979, the

distribution of the *Principia Discordia* outside California resulted in a surge of

recognition in the 1980s and early 1990s. Wilson was busy writing *The Final Secret of

the Illuminati* (1977), the *Schrödinger's Cat Trilogy* (1980-1981), *Masks of the Illuminati*

(1981), *Prometheus Rising* (1983), and *The Historical Illuminatus Chronicles* (a series of

sequels to *Illuminatus!* published in 1982, 1985, and 1991), as well as a number of

essays, plays, and nonfiction books, all related in some degree to *Illuminatus!* and its

Discordian worldview. People who read Wilson's works or the *Principia* formed

Discordian cabals and sometimes attended neo-pagan gatherings and conventions

together.[61] Certainly there were more cabals in this period than the rumored twenty of

the '60s, though, as we shall see, it is hard to tell.

With the exception of the prominent authors we have discussed so far, it is difficult to

determine how many Discordians there are in the world or how they are organized

because Discordianism is, in the words of Margot Adler, "an anarchist's paradise." The

Principia states, "We Discordians Shall Stick Apart."[62] In the same vein as Wilson

making up conspiratorial enemies for the Discordians, however, Thornley and Hill made

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[61] Adler, p. 353.
[62] Adler, p. 347.

up several Discordian organizations. The overarching society is the Paratheo-

Anametamystikhood of Eris Esoteric, or POEE, which is "not really esoteric, it's just that

nobody pays much attention to us."

> The POEE HEAD TEMPLE is the Joshua Norton Cabal of The Discordian
> Society, which is located in Mal-2's pineal gland and can be found by temporally
> and spatially locating the rest of Mal-2.
>> POEE has no treasury, no by-laws, no articles, no guides save Mal-2's
> pineal gland, and has only one scruple—which Mal-2 keeps on his key chain.
>> POEE has not registered, incorporated, or otherwise chartered with the
> State, and so the State does not recognize POEE or POEE Ordinations, which is
> only fair, because POEE does not recognize the State.[63]

There are five degrees of membership in POEE, as well as a "Disorganizational Matrix"

dividing various members and sub-organizations into meaningless categories.[64] The

Principia continues:

> If you like Erisianism as it is presented according to Mal-2, then you may wish to
> form your own POEE CABAL as a POEE PRIEST and you can go do a bunch of
> POEE Priestly Things. A "POEE Cabal" is exactly what you think it is.
>> […]
>> Should you find that your own revelations of The Goddess become
> substantially different than the revelations of Mal-2, then perhaps the Goddess has
> plans for you as an Episkopos, and you might consider creating your own sect
> from scratch, unhindered. Episkoposes are not competing with each other, and
> they are all POEE priests anyway (as soon as I locate them). The point is that
> Episkoposes are developing separate paths to the Erisian mountain top.[65]

There are no qualifications to become a POEE priest, because "if you want to be a POEE

Priest then you must undoubtedly qualify. Who could possibly know better than you

whether or not you should be Ordained?" To start a POEE cabal, one merely follows the

instructions in the *Principia*:

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[63] *Principia Discordia*, p. 22.
[64] *Principia Discordia*, p. 20.
[65] *Principia Discordia*, p. 31.

1. Write the ERISIAN AFFIRMATION in five copies.
2. Sign and nose-print each copy.
3. Send one to the President of the United States.
4. Send one to
    The California State Bureau of Furniture and Bedding
    1021 'D' Street, Sacramento CA 94814
5. Nail one to a telephone pole. Hide one. And burn the other. Then consult your pineal gland.[66]

The Erisian Affirmation is as follows:

BEFORE THE GODDESS ERIS, I (name or holyname), do herewith declare myself a POEE BROTHER of THE LEGION OF DYNAMIC DISCORD. HAIL HAIL HAIL HAIL HAIL ERIS ERIS ERIS ERIS ERIS ALL HAIL DISCORDIA![67]

In short, all one has to do to join POEE is (1) decide it exists and (2) include yourself in it.[68]   One who instead "prefers total autonomy" and creates one's own sect is an Episkpos of the Discordian Society, while one who chooses to be a solitary Discordian is automatically a member of the Legion of Dynamic Discord.[69] We will return later to the idea that one can be a member of a Discordian group by default. The deliberately vague or silly language surrounding POEE and other Discordian "disorganizations" show that they are intended to be parodies of occult and (presumably fictional) conspiracy-theory groups. Wilson's construction of the Bavarian Illuminati further developed this theme.

Despite this deliberate, anarchistic disorganization, small Discordian cabals do exist. Some, such as the Eris Society, which was created in 1981 by financial writer Doug Casey and includes whoever happens to be invited to his gatherings, are only slightly

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[66] *Principia Discordia*, p. 35.
[67] *Principia Discordia*, p. 33.
[68] Adler, p. 347.
[69] *Principia Discordia*, p. 39.

associated with Discordianism. The Society describes itself as a "group of free thinkers who meet once a year to discuss…any…subject which may lead us to the world of ideas beyond our workaday lives."[70] Most of the speeches that invitees give deal with the business world, trendy intellectual topics, or popularized occult or New Age topics[71]—in short, "Discordianism" for wealthy, trendy people. Examples of other, more Discordian groups include the First House of LAP ("The House of LAP is today what the Legion of Dynamic Discord and the Erisian Liberation Front were yesterday, tomorrow"), which has a membership of one,[72] or the Los Angeles Cacophony Society, which was established in 1991 and is a cross between "a psychological terrorist organization and a social club" that produces modern art "spectacles" such as "staged UFO encounters."[73] The first KallistiCon, a Discordian (Un)Convention,[74] took place in 2001 in San Francisco as a "fairly small gathering over the course of a weekend," where participants "engage in ritual, share meals, play games, trade ideas, visit Emperor Norton's grave." There have been seven or eight KallistiCons as of 2009,[75] but the preferred gathering place of Discordians seems to be the Internet.

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[70] "About the Eris Society," NuWiki, http://www.nuwiki.com/cgi-bin/nuwiki.cgi?display=ABOUT%20ERIS, retrieved 28 April 2009.

[71] The Eris Society, http://erissociety.org/, retrieved 28 April 2009.

[72] "Hestas Coyote on the Discordian Society," Hestas Coyote's Home Page, http://www.geocities.com/Athens/3115/dishest.htm, retrieved 28 April 2009.

[73] Belissa Cohen, "Best Nihilism," *The L.A. Weekly* (1994), in http://alumnus.caltech.edu/~reynard/la_caco/C_nihil.html, retrieved 28 April 2009.

[74] KallistiCon: A Discordian (Un)Convention, http://www.kallisticon.com/, retrieved 28 April 2009.

[75] "Networking," Discordian.com, http://www.discordian.com/networkingmain.html, retrieved 28 April 2009.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, according to David Chidester, "Discordian

[web]sites [had] multiplied to more than thirty."[76] A Google.com search for

"Discordianism" today provides nearly 55,000 results; the first is its Wikipedia entry, the

second discordian.com. The latter was established in 1998 by Saint Mae of the Church of

No Dead Saints to "further their purpose of promoting Discordianism as the thinking

prankster's religion." In early 2003, the website was revamped[77] and now includes

philosophical essays on sex, memetics (the study of the spread of memes, or social

viruses), self-illumination, vaguely anarchistic networking, and pagan-inspired rituals.

There are two POEE websites: poee.org, the home of The Living Encyclopedia

Chaotic,[78] and poee.co.uk, a United Kingdom forum and news blog that appears to have

been established in 2004.[79] Perhaps the most popular Discordian website is 23 Apples of

Eris, which seems to date from 2005[80] and contains forums and essays, games, comics,

and pranks relating to Discordianism, as well as hosting a number of other Discordian

sites. Also popular are the sites that host virtual copies of the *Principia Discordia*:

ology.org, which includes links to Swedish and German versions[81], and

principiadiscordia.com, which includes the pictures as well as the text of the print

editions and hosts Radio Free Discordia[82], an online radio station. Discordianism even

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[76] Chidester, p. 192.

[77] "About Us," Discordian.com, http://www.discordian.com/usmain.html, retrieved 28 April 2009.

[78] A nonsensical encyclopedia created line-by-line by anyone who comments. "The Living Encyclopedia
Chaotic," POEE, http://www.poee.org/living/, retrieved 28 April 2009.

[79] The first news item dates from August 2004. POEE | UK Resource Center, http://www.poee.co.uk/site/
component/option,com_frontpage/Itemid,1/limit,50/limitstart,100/, retrieved 28 April 2009.

[80] The first news items date from 2005. 23 Apples of Eris, http://23ae.com/, retrieved 28 April 2009.

[81] "The Principia Discordia," http://www.ology.org/principia/, retrieved 29 April 2009.

[82] Radio Free Discordia, http://radiofreediscordia.org/, retrieved 29 April 2009.

has its own wiki encyclopedia: Discordipedia sprang up in 2008 and currently has 155

pages of content.[83]

Inspired by the playful creativity of the *Principia Discordia* and the creation of the

Bavarian Illuminati by Robert Anton Wilson, many Discordians have taken to imitating

the *Principia* and writing their own crazy-wise works. These works are by no means

authoritative—even the *Principia* can be cast aside if one so desires, just as some Hindus

do not accept the Vedas as scripture—but some have become popular and some have

even been published in print.[84] The *Apocrypha Discordia*, published online in PDF

format, was "compiled from diverse sources" by "the Rev DrJohn Swabey."[85] The 2002

second edition deals with various made-up aspects of Discordian mythology,

disorganization, spells, prayers, a great deal of joking and silliness, and the author's

presumably fictional interaction with the goddess Eris—just like the *Principia*. *The Book

of Eris* (published in 2005 by Synaptyclypse Generator, available online[86] but only rarely

in print) is similar to the *Apocrypha Discordia* but includes less deliberate silliness and

vagueness and therefore seems to be targeted more toward a lay audience. Its author,

Vincent Sebastian Verthaine, writes that he has

> discovered the long lost Book of Eris and its sequel, the book of Chaos
> and its Virtue, and painstakingly translated it from an ancient Atlantian
> dialect to English. (actually I compiled it together from different sources
> after many nights of drinking and carousing). If the Principia Discordia is
> an "introduction to the Erisian Mysterees (which is most good)", the Book

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[83] "Statistics," Discordian Wiki, http://discordia.wikia.com/wiki/Special:Statistics, retrieved 3 May 2009.
[84] See Synaptaclypse Generator, http://www.lulu.com/discordia, retrieved 29 April 2009.
[85] Rev DrJohn Swabey, *Apocrypha Discordia*, 2nd ed. (2002), http://www.23ae.com/files/apocrypha2.pdf , retrieved 28 April 2009.
[86] Eris Kallisti Discordia, *The Book of Eris*, http://www.verthaine.sphosting.com/#, retrieved 29 April 2009.

of Eris and the book of Chaos and its Virtue are the advance courses into
the Erisian Mysterees (which is f*ckin' mindblowing).[87]

Two years later, Synaptyclypse Generator went on to publish the only hardcover version
of the *Principia* to date.[88] Another Discordian group, Cabaret Brainwash, are working on
the *Eris Sutra*, a simplification of the *Principia* which "tries to retain the wonder and
silliness of the original *Principia Discordia*, while turning its face towards the future" by
adding new content.[89] An even simpler imitation of the *Principia* is the *Book of Ataxia*
by Professor Mu-Chao, posted on the 23 Apples of Eris forums on March 1, 2005,[90]
containing a collection of short poems, made-up sayings, Biblical-sounding "excerpts,"
and jokes.

ii. Mythology and Worldview

Discordianism is quite literally the worship of the goddess Discord, which is the Roman
name of the Greek goddess Eris (some Discordians therefore call it Erisianism or the
Erisian Movement). She is best known in mythology for starting the Trojan War: upset at
not being invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, She inscribed a golden apple with
the word *kallisti* ("to the prettiest") and threw it into the wedding party, prompting a fight
between Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena, which began the Trojan War. In the *Principia*

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[87] Vincent Sebastian Verthaine, Synaptaclypse Generator, http://www.syngen.co.uk/archives/7, retrieved 29 April 2009.
[88] Amazon.com, http://www.amazon.com/Principia-Discordia-Magnum-Malaclypse-Younger/dp/1846856043/ref=sr_1_13/102-5973680-8720163?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1173332365&sr=8-13, retrieved 29 April 2009.
[89] "Eris Sutra," http://brainwash.discordian.com/sutra/index.htm, retrieved 29 April 2009.
[90] Professor Mu-Chao, "The Book of Ataxia," 23 Apples of Eris, http://23ae.com/index.asp?post=32#, retrieved29 April 2009.

Discordia this is known as the Doctrine of the Original Snub and, in a typical example of

bizarre, paradoxical Discordian logic (because Eris was apparently eating a hot dog at the

time), is the reason why Discordians do not eat hot dog buns on Fridays.[91] As noted

above, Eris represents the principle of chaos, which most people do not recognize as

being equally important as the principle of order. She is the source of "discord, conflict,

and chaos…but also of the 'happy anarchy' of freedom, creativity, and laughter."[92]

The *Principia* sums Her up as "not hateful or malicious. But She is mischievous, and

does get a little bitchy at times."[93] As we have seen, Eris occasionally appears to Her

followers, most notably Thornley and Hill, in order to show to them the divine truth that

governs the universe, or just to chat. Whether or not Discordians such as Thornley and

Hill actually experience Eris as a manifestation of the transcendent divine is,

unfortunately, unknown.

Eris's conflict and "happy anarchy" symbolism is the basis for a made-up Discordian

cosmology. According to the *Principia*,

> In the beginning there was VOID, who had two daughters; one (the
> smaller) was that of BEING, named ERIS, and one (the larger) was of
> NON-BEING, named ANERIS. (To this day, the fundamental truth that
> Aneris is the larger is apparent to all who compare the great number of
> things that do not exist with the comparatively small number of things that
> do exist.)

Eris was born pregnant and bore the fruits of many things; her sister, however, was born

sterile. Jealous, Aneris stole some of Eris's "existent things" and changed them into non-

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[91] *Principia Discordia*, pp. 24-25.
[92] Chidester, p. 198.
[93] *Principia Discordia*, p. 22.

existent things, claiming them as her own. This prompted a competition between Eris

and Aneris, the former bringing forth existent things and the latter making them non-

existent, "and to this day, things appear and disappear in this very manner." For "five

zillion years" Eris amused Herself by arranging the things she had created, and eventually

noticed disorder, "previously not apparent because everything was chaos," and the fact

that chaos is ordered in many ways and in many ways it is not.

> And She taught order and disorder to play with each other in contest
> games, and to take turns amusing each other. She named the side of
> disorder after Herself, "ERISTIC" because Being is anarchic. And then, in
> a mood of sympathy for Her lonely sister, She named the other side
> "ANERISTIC" which flattered Aneris and smoothed the friction a little
> that was between them.

Then Void bore Eris and Aneris a brother, Spirituality. Eris worried that Aneris would

take away Spirituality's existence, so Void decreed that when Spirituality left the realm

of being, he would not become non-being but would return instead to Void.

> And so it is that we, as men, do not exist until we do; and then it is that we
> play with our world of existent things, and order and disorder them, and so
> it shall be that non-existence shall take us back from existence and that
> nameless spirituality shall return to Void, like a tired child home from a
> very wild circus.[94]

At this point the Discordian mythology leaves the realm of the timeless and enters human

history to deal with theodicy, or the struggle to reconcile the existence of evil in the

world with the existence of a benevolent divinity.

> In the year 1166 B.C., a malcontented hunchbrain by the name of
> Greyface, got it into his head that the universe was as humorless as he, and
> he began to teach that play was sinful because it contradicted the ways of
> Serious Order. "Look at all the order around you," he said. And from that,
> he deluded honest men to believe that reality was a straightjacket affair

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[94] *Principia Discordia*, pp. 63-65.

and not the happy romance as men had known it… Greyface and his followers took the game of playing at life more seriously than they took life itself and were known even to destroy other living beings whose ways of life differed from their own.

The story concludes by noting that "mankind has since been suffering from a psychological and spiritual imbalance. Imbalance causes frustration, and frustration causes fear…[This imbalance] is called THE CURSE OF GREYFACE."[95]

The Curse of Greyface included the division of life into order/disorder as the essential positive/negative polarity, instead of building a game foundation with creative/destructive as the essential positive/negative. [Greyface] has thereby caused man to endure the destructive aspects of order and has prevented man from effectively participating in the creative uses of disorder. Civilization reflects this unfortunate division.
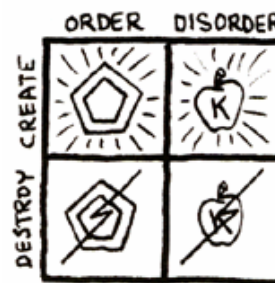
It is therefore the goal of the Discordians to "work toward the proposition that creative disorder, like creative order, is possible and desirable; and that destructive order, like destructive disorder, is unnecessary and undesirable." [96] This vaguely anarchistic goal can be achieved by means of what Discordians call jaking, reality hacking, or Operation Mindfuck.

Reality hacking is a terrorism of the mind, intended to break the Curse of Greyface. In secular form it is known as culture jamming, "a form of 'semiological guerilla warfare' which…recontextualizes commercial or media images or products in order to

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[95] *Principia Discordia*, p. 47.
[96] *Principia Discordia*, p. 70.

denaturalize their meanings."[97] Robert Anton Wilson calls it "guerrilla ontology,"

signifying one's "intent to attack language and knowledge the way terrorists attack their

targets: to jump out from the shadows for an unprovoked attack, then slink back and hide

behind a hearty belly laugh."[98] Its purpose, made explicit in the name Operation

Mindfuck, is to shock its audience into a paradigm shift—to make people think critically

about the world, thereby becoming aware that too much order is bad for individual minds

and for the world. The primary means by which this reality hacking occurs is laughter.

In order to befuddle a greyface (someone who takes himself far too seriously), according

to the *Principia Discordia*, one might perform the Turkey Curse:

> Take a foot stance as if you were John L. Sullivan preparing for fisticuffs.
> Face the particular greyface you wish to short-circuit…Begin waving your
> arms in an elaborate manner…Chant, loudly and clearly:
> > GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE!
> The results will be instantly apparent.[99]

Inspired by the *Principia*, Discordians have been short-circuiting people and posting their

results on the Internet for many years.[100] Though there is a great deal of overlap, reality

hacking seems to fall into three major categories: jakes based on the human body, usually

the body of the one performing the jake; jakes which subvert the culturally accepted

meanings of an object or idea; and jakes which mock any and all authority. Examples

from the Discordian website 23 Apples of Eris include having a number of people with

the alarms on their watches all set to go off at the same time enter a department store

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[97] Allen, Dennis W., "Rtmark: Viral Activism and the Meaning of "Post-Identity," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Thinking Post-Identity (Spring, 2003), p. 7. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1315395.

[98] Belsito, Peter, ed., *Notes from the Pop Underground* (Berkeley, CA: The Last Gasp of San Francisco, 1985), p. 22.

[99] *Principia Discordia*, p. 71.

[100] See 23 Apples of Eris, http://23ae.com/, or the Yahoo jake.

without appearing to recognize one another, then filing neatly out of the store when their watches go off, leaving the clerks befuddled; asking passers-by, while dressed as a homeless person, if they would like a spare quarter; a sign that says, "WARNING! It is against federal statute to read this sign. Reading this sign is cause for persecution."[101] In short, Operation Mindfuck uses laughter to subvert the brainwashing Curse of Greyface, freeing people to make use of creative disorder.

The first (mythical) reality hackers were, according to the *Principia*, the five apostles of Eris: Hung Mung, a "Sage of Ancient China," Dr. Van Van Mojo, a "Head Doctor of Deep Africa," Sri Syadasti, an "Indian Pundit and Prince," Zarathud the Incorrigible, a "hard nosed Hermit of Medieval Europe," and the Elder Malaclypse, a "Non-Prophet." Their descriptions are clearly intended to poke fun at the saints and sages of established religions and the clashes between their sects. For example,

> Erisians of The Laughing Christ sect are of the silly contention that Dr. Mojo is an imposter and that PATAMUNZO LINGANANDA is the True Second Apostle. Lord Omar claims that Dr. Mojo heaps hatred upon Patamunzo, who sends only Love Vibrations in return. But we of the POEE sect know that Patamunzo is the Real Imposter, and that those vibrations of his are actually an attempt to subvert Dr. Mojo's rightful apostilic authority by shaking him out of his wits.[102]

Discordians, like adherents of other religions ("I suppose that Pope Paul is the son of Mr. and Mrs. VI?") are encouraged to take on holy names and "titles of mystical import"[103] and attempt to become saints.[104]

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[101] 23 Apples of Eris, retrieved 1 June 2007.
[102] *Principia Discordia*, pp. 46-47.
[103] *Principia Discordia*, p. 42.
[104] *Principia Discordia*, p. 67.

Whether or not they become saints, however, everyone on earth is already a Discordian. As Chidester puts it, "the Discordians raise a profound question about human identity with their proposition that everyone is already a member of their religion by virtue of being human, although, in most cases, admittedly, they are completely unaware of their membership."[105] Indeed, all people are not only Discordian but are also Discordian popes.

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       THE BEARER OF THIS CARD
     IS A GENUINE AND AUTHORIZED

         ～ POPE ～

     So please Treat Him Right
         GOOD FOREVER

 Genuine and authorized by The HOUSE of APOSTLES of ERIS
 ──────────────────────────────────────────
   Every man, woman and child on this Earth is a genuine and authorized Pope.
   Reproduce and distribute these cards freely•P.O.E.E. Head Temple, San Francisco
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Thus Discordianism is revealed to be a "perceptual game" that can have "far-reaching and amazingly liberating" effects on an individual.[106] The goal of the game is to show that, in the words of the *Principia Discordia*, "All statements are true in some sense, false in some sense, meaningless in some sense, true and false in some sense, true and meaningless in some sense, false and meaningless in some sense, and true and false and

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[105] Chidester, p. 211.
[106] "Wiccan Paths: Traditions," Undernet #wicca Home Page, http://www.pagans.org/wicca/branches/branches.html, retrieved 28 April 2009.

meaningless in some sense"[107]—in other words, to show the value of absurdity in a world

ruled by order. This absurdity manifests in humor and mockery, which is why many

people who believe that religion is a serious matter maintain that Discordianism is

insincere in its claims to genuine religious belief.

Many Discordians have themselves protested the common view that they are not sincere

in their beliefs. The problem seems to arise, as I have already argued, from the differing

meanings of the term "parody." One Wikipedia user, in a 2006 discussion on whether or

not Discordianism should be categorized as a parody religion, wrote that "Discordianism

is certainly not meant to be taken seriously, Eris forbid, but I don't really think it's a

parody... So I've been bold and removed it!" A user called Silence clarified: "'Parody

religion' means a humorous or satirical religion, not necessarily one that's a technical

parody." [108] This was not a new debate, however. Five years earlier, a number of

Discordians objected to the search engine Yahoo.com categorizing their religion under

Parody Religions. They responded to this perceived offense by bombarding Yahoo! with

emails (humorous, sometimes even silly in tone, but serious in essence, which is what the

best jakes are) demanding that Yahoo! place Discordianism with the rest of the "real

religions," or else place the rest of the "real religions" in the Parody Religions category

with Discordianism. One letter-writer notes, "I think you may be surprised to learn just

how many people you are injuring with your heinous disregard for our spiritual beliefs."

Another asks what religion Discordianism is supposed to be lampooning: "We don't take

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[107] *Principia Discordia*, pp. 46-47.
[108] "Talk:Parody religion," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Parody_religion, retrieved 27 March 2009.

any of the other religions seriously enough to parody them!" A third writes, "It is true

that our religion is very light-hearted, and we often like to make fun of ourselves. But is

this any reason to describe our religion as a joke? I think not!"[109] Though the

Discordians won something of a pyrrhic victory—Yahoo! now lists Discordianism under

Entertainment > Humor > Religion[110]—the debate and confusion continues, as evidenced

by the Wikipedia discussion in 2006.

Perhaps the last word on Discordianism should come from the Discordians. Hicutus

Confusus Episkipos (DSM) writes on the 23 Apples of Eris website:

> In a nutshell, we do not parody the religion of others, we parody our own
> religion, and not out of irreverence per se, but out of our greatest respect
> for the central idea that people, and the world we live in, are/is more
> important than religious ideology, and by parodying our own ideology
> (which is not even ideology) we assure that the tools of belief/doubt
> always remain as tools and never turn into shackles. In short, we are not a
> joke. We subscribe to a viable, alternative to religion itself.[111]

B. Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster: A Parody Religion

In August of 2005 the Kansas School Board decided to allow alternatives to evolution to

be taught in public schools. This decision, pressured into existence by the overwhelming

local influence of the creationists (fundamental Christians who believe that the world was

created by God instead of evolving over geological time), had unintended consequences.

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[109] "Jakes – Yahoo Parody Religion Case," 23 Apples of Eris, http://23ae.com/format/yahooparody.html, retrieved 28 April 2009.

[110] Yahoo! Directory, http://dir.yahoo.com/Entertainment/Humor/Religion/Discordian/, retrieved 28 April 2009.

[111] Hicutus Confusus Episkipos (DSM), 23 Apples of Eris, http://23ae.com/format/yahooparody.html# Hicutus, retrieved 26 April 2009.

In order to be taught in schools, creationism has had to adopt the guise of a scientific

theory rather than a faith-based claim. That guise is Intelligent Design, which presents

pseudoscientific support intended to show that the universe is far too complex to have

evolved on its own; rather, it must have been consciously created by an intelligent being.

However, as James Randi, a debunker of pseudoscientific claims, points out, Intelligent

Design does not specify the identity of the creator-being, tacitly assuming instead that it

is perfectly obvious that the creator is the god of the fundamentalist Christians. This

leaves a great deal of room for the devotees of *any* god to step in,[112] which is exactly

what Bobby Henderson, a 25-year-old unemployed Oregonian with a degree in

physics,[113] did.

Henderson wrote an open letter to the Kansas School Board in response to the decision

and, after several months with no reply, posted it on his website,[114] venganza.org. He

wrote of the importance of having multiple viewpoints so that students can

> choose for themselves the theory that makes the most sense to them…I
> and many others around the world are of the strong belief that the universe
> was created by a Flying Spaghetti Monster. It was He who created all that
> we see and all that we feel. We feel strongly that the overwhelming
> scientific evidence pointing towards evolutionary processes is nothing but
> a coincidence, put in place by Him.

Henderson requested that this theory be taught along with Intelligent Design and

evolution, as all of them are "based on science, not faith." Because "some find that hard

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[112] James Randi, "Commentary," James Randi Educational Foundation (2005), http://www.randi.org/jr/ 200509/091605church.html#1, retrieved 30 April 2009.

[113] Sarah Boxer, "Is There Intelligent Spaghetti Out There?" The New York Times (August 29, 2005), http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/29/arts/design/29mons.html, retrieved 30 April 2009.

[114] Bobby Henderson, "Comment on the Open Letter," Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, http://www.venganza.org/about/open-letter/discussion/, retrieved 30 April 2009.

to believe," he went on to summarize the beliefs of the devotees of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (abbreviated to FSM), and concluded that equal time should be given in classrooms to Intelligent Design, "Flying Spaghetti Monsterism," and "logical conjecture based on overwhelming observable evidence."[115] Henderson later said that "I wrote the letter for my own amusement as much as anything" and that he had not foreseen the consequences it was to have.[116]

Within days of posting the letter online, it became an Internet phenomenon. In one year, Henderson's website received more than 350 million hits and used about 700 gigabytes per month in bandwidth, which is quite a lot for a personal website; Henderson himself received over 15,000 emails that year in response to the letter, including several from members of the Kansas School Board, most of whom thanked him for the laugh. Of the responses from the Board posted on Henderson's website, only one declared, "It is a serious offense to mock God."[117] Henderson wrote, after the fact, that

> The letter, after being blogged [about] heavily for months, was printed in
> several large newspapers, including the New York Times, the Washington
> Post, the Chicago Sun Times, and many others. The newspaper articles
> caught the attention of book publishers, and at one point there were six
> publishers interested in getting the Word of the Flying Spaghetti Monster
> out to the public.[118]

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[115] Bobby Henderson, "Open Letter to Kansas School Board," Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, http://www.venganza.org/about/open-letter/, retrieved 30 April 2009.
[116] Dan Vergano, "'Spaghetti Monster' is noodling around with faith," USA Today (26 March 2006), http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2006-03-26-spaghetti-monster_x.htm, retrieved 30 April 2009.
[117] Bobby Henderson, "Kansas School Board Responses to the Open Letter," Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, http://www.venganza.org/about/open-letter/responses/, retrieved 30 April 2009.
[118] Henderson, "Comment on the Open Letter."

The popularity of the FSM religion, called Pastafarianism, seems to have been sparked by

a challenge put forth by the well-known website Boing Boing: "We are willing to pay

any individual $250,000 if they can produce empirical evidence which proves that Jesus

is not the son of the Flying Spaghetti Monster."[119] The reward was later raised to $1

million. Pastafarianism was also featured on other popular websites such as Fark.com

and has since engendered fan sites, such as the International Society for Awareness of the

FSM.[120] It has also generated an enormous amount of hate mail, including death threats,

all of which Henderson has posted on his website.[121]

Not all responses to Pastafarianism are virtual, though. In 2006 Villard Books published

The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, written by Henderson. Unlike the *Principia*

Discordia, it is not available for free on the Internet (though it is still very widely

available in print), nor is it written in a faux-Biblical style. In a clear, intimate, and

obviously ironic tone, Henderson discusses the perceived drawbacks of evolutionary

science, the history of the world from a Pastafarian perspective, and the nature of the

FSM and Pastafarian theology; includes pseudoscientific essays from other contributors;

and provides a guide to spreading Pastafarian propaganda, including how to make an

image of the FSM literally out of pasta. Indeed, physical crafts seem to be the primary

means by which Pastafarians demonstrate their adherence to the religion. Henderson's

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[119] Xeni Jardin, "Boing Boing's $250,000 Intelligent Design Challenge," Boing Boing, http://www.boingboing.net/2005/08/19/boing-boings-250000-.html, retrieved 30 April 2009.
[120] International Society for the Awareness of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, http://www.fsmawareness.com/, retrieved 2 May 2009.
[121] Bobby Henderson, "Hate Mail (and concerned criticism) archive," Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, http://www.venganza.org/category/hate-mail/, retrieved 2 May 2009.

website displays a wide variety of pictures of FSM crafts made by adherents all over the country, including chalk drawings on the sidewalk, Halloween pumpkins and costumes, fireworks, ice sculptures, hats, flags, knitted Christmas tree toppers, drawings, war protest signs, billboards, plush toys, and, of course, missionaries in pirate regalia evangelizing on street corners and in parades. An artist, Niklas Jansson, painted an imitation of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, with, of course, the FSM in place of God; this has become the unofficial brand image of Pastafarianism. There is even a one-act comedy play, *The Flying Spaghetti Monster Holiday Pageant*, written by Jeremy Gable and approved by Henderson, which premiered in 2006 at the Hunger Artists Theater in Fullerton, California.[122]
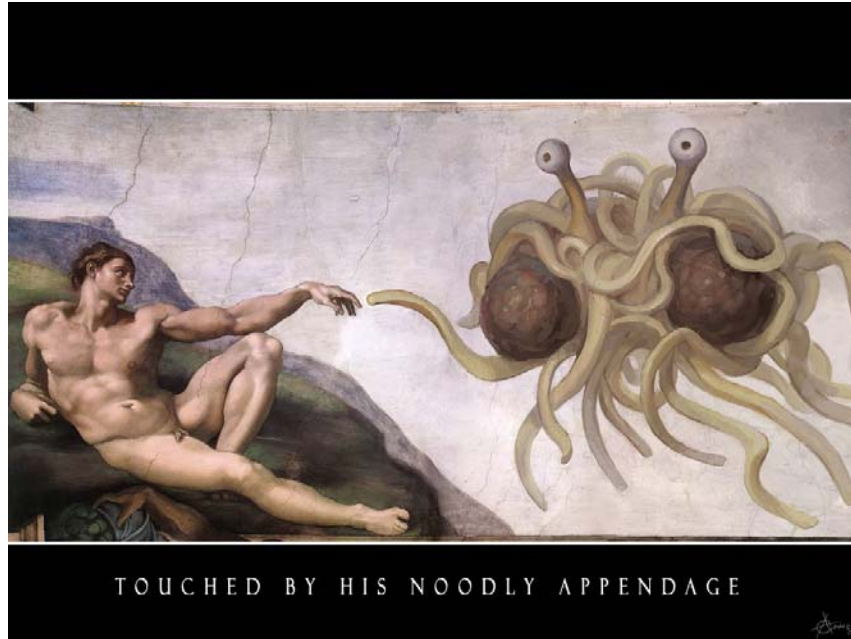

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[122] "Flying Spaghetti Monster Holiday Pageant," Hunger Artists Theatre Co., http://www.hungerartists.net/fsm.htm, retrieved 2 May 2009.
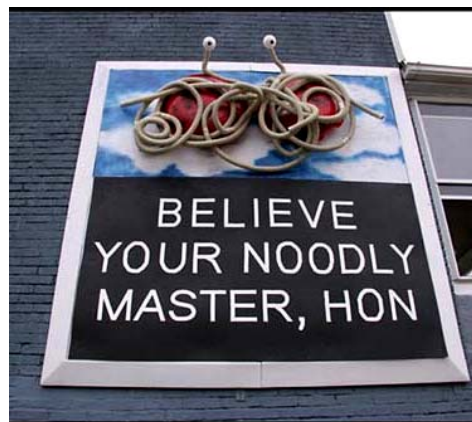
[123] http://www.ravelry.com/patterns/library/flying-spaghetti-monster-3, retrieved 2 May 2009.

[124] http://www.venganza.org/spread-the-word/billboard/, retrieved 2 May 2009.

TOUCHED BY HIS NOODLY APPENDAGE [125]

The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is a parody of Intelligent Design and thus takes all its constituent parts from a bricolage of fundamentalist Christian beliefs, American popular culture, and Italian cooking. Instead of God, there is an invisible noodly monster; instead of choirs of angels in heaven, there is a beer volcano and a stripper factory; the Chosen People are not Jews but pirates, who were not thieves but distributed candy to children (this was the origin of Halloween). A typical example of this bricolage from the recreation of the story of Genesis, in *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, is "Pastover," "where the angel hair pasta of death passes over all the houses that have a smear of sauce on the doorpost," or the Eight "I'd Really Rather You Didn'ts," such as "I'd Really Rather You Didn't Act Like A Sanctimonious, Holier-Than-Thou Ass When Describing My Noodly Goodness. If Some People Don't Believe

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[125] http://www.itchstudios.com/psg/other/fsm.jpg, retrieved 2 May 2009.

In Me, That's Okay. Really, I'm Not That Vain."[126] In the same vein, Henderson

describes several historical heretics (the equivalent of Pastafarian saints) whose "poor

lives illustrate just how hard a world without FSMism can be"; among these are Aristotle,

Leonardo da Vinci, Giordano Bruno, Charles Darwin ("Evolution's 'Creepy Little

Cook'"), John Scopes ("The ACLU's Little Monkey"), and Dolly the Sheep.[127] But

perhaps the best example of the Pastafarian bricolage is the guarantee, perhaps inspired

by the satirical Church of the SubGenius: "Try us for thirty days and if you don't like us,

your God will most likely take you back."[128]

As noted above, Bobby Henderson did not intend for the FSM to be taken seriously. The

Gospel points out that FSM adherents are "peaceful, open-minded, well educated,

and…have never killed others for their opposing beliefs. Compare our record to yours

[that of the Christian fundamentalists]."[129] Indeed, Henderson wrote the letter to the

Kansas School Board because he believed that redefining science to include a place for

supernatural forces beyond explanation, as Intelligent Design has attempted to do, is

dangerous. "I don't have any problem with religion," he said in a USA Today interview,

"but it is not science."[130] Given this evidence, however, it is clear that Pastafarianism

exists in two domains: the serious core belief that Intelligent Design is destructive to

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[126] Bobby Henderson, *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* (New York: Villard Books, 2006), pp. 76-78.
[127] Henderson, pp. 80-89.
[128] Henderson, p. 93.
[129] Henderson, p. 65.
[130] Vergano, "Spaghetti Monster is noodling around with faith."

science and society, and the frivolous faux-religious trappings like the claim that heaven

has a beer volcano. The former is the ends of Pastafarianism, the latter its means.

C. *Center for Duck Studies*[131]

In the summer of 1995 at the Philipps–University Marburg, someone asked an American

student, Jason Truesdell, how he was. He considered for a moment, realized his

condition, and responded, "Ducky!" Thus was born the Center for Duck Studies, which

soon moved from Germany to Seattle, Washington, when Truesdell and his friends

graduated.

Like Discordianism, the Center for Duck Studies is only slightly organized. Indeed,

> The Duck is perfectly happy without organization. However, the
> development of the human species prefers an organized approach,
> particularly for the purpose of enlightenment. This can be proven by
> considering the methods of the Buddha, but even his way cannot compare
> of that of those who follow the Way of The Duck.

There are Popes, Priests, and Quacks (lay followers of the Duck); the only

responsibilities involved in this hierarchy are exploring one's connection to the Duck,

attempting, at least, to contribute toward the literary development of the Center, and

discouraging consumption of waterfowl. As with many joke religions, however, one can

be Ducky without affiliating with the Center, especially given that Truesdell's blog refers

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[131] All information is from Jason Truesdell, The Center for Duck Studies, http://www.jagaimo.com/duck/, retrieved 26 March 2009.

to the Center as an "old pet project" unlikely to get the attention it deserves.[132] Similarly, there are very few rituals associated with being Ducky; the Center's website merely asks that adherents refrain from eating duck, have a merry Duckmass, and make a duck face (pulling the lips over the teeth) for fun if one feels like it.

Duckiness, the essential concern of the religion, is a powerful and indescribable state of mind, of which one is simultaneously aware and not aware—in other words, it is enlightenment. According to the Center's website, "Whether it is through a sensory perception or an intuitive contact, whether it is complete or partial, whether the Duck is within or without, the Duck remains, and the Duck is Ducky." The paradoxical nature of the Duck and of the language surrounding it in the Center's documents is clearly based on a Westernized blend of Zen Buddhism and Taoism. Being ducky means "going with the flow," living fully in the moment or in the flow of the Tao; duckiness cannot be described in words or circumscribed by the limits of categorization; everyone has the potential to be ducky and to teach others the path to reaching the Duck within oneself.

The blending of Eastern and Western religion is also evident in the few documents written by Truesdell and various other Ducky Popes. One such document is a fragment of a creation myth: in the beginning the cosmic egg hatched, but what laid that egg? The Duck, of course. "And…yet the Duck was one with the egg. And as the egg proceedeth from the Duck, so do Ducks proceed from eggs. So is the great cycle continued." The question of whether the Duck or the egg came first is meaningless, for both are eternal.

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[132] "Jason Truesdell: Home Page," http://www.jagaimo.com/home/jason/, retrieved 3 May 2009.

Another document, called the Duckisutra, is inspired by the Vedas: "Know, Mallardputra, the Duck is the way, the Great Webbed-Foot, the Fully Ducky One." In stark contrast to the cyclic, mythical, and serene Hindu- and Buddhist-inspired writings, there are also modified Americanisms, such as "If a Duck quacks in the forest, of course it makes a sound, silly," and a tract imitating the propaganda of fundamentalist Christians:

> You can start down the PATH to the DUCK by SITTING in a webbed-legged position and pleading:
> > *Oh GREAT WEBBED-FOOT!*
> > *Oh most glorious of all the FEATHERED creatures!*
> > *Help me find the way!*
> > *Help me find the DUCK within me!*
> Then, friend, you will be well-along the path to the DUCK-MIND. And the DUCK-MIND will SAVE you!

It is evident that the Center for Duck Studies mocks fundamentalist Christianity and admires Eastern religions such as Buddhism. Focusing on the latter, the question then becomes, is this religion sincere?

Truesdell answers the question of sincerity by referring to paradox, which, as we have seen, is fundamentally religious. The question, he writes,

> may stem from assumptions that religion must be boring or stable to be real. The Duck is neither boring nor stable; indeed, It is capable of flight at a moment's notice.
> Duckists are very often filled with Joy and Laughter. This comes from the Duck-Mind. Whether we are laughing or serious, we are still Ducky.
> In this sense, it is irrelevant whether we are serious or joking. We have the Duck, and that is the Truth that Matters. If you take the Duck seriously, then It is serious. If you take the Duck as a joke, It is a joke. It remains the Duck.
> The Duck Within must be capable of laughter. Laughter makes us Ducky. Seriousness makes us Ducky, too, but in a different way.

In short, whether or not one takes Duckism serious depends on one's point of view. If one is willing to accept the metaphor of the Duck, then Duckism, which has a divine being, mythology, rituals, organization, and a consistent worldview, is capable of providing genuine religious experiences. Unfortunately, it is unknown whether or not Truesdell or anyone else who participated in the Center for Duck Studies was able to have a religious experience through Duckism.

IV. CONCLUSION

There is a notable lack of research on joke religions. As stated above, the only existing

work in print that discusses joke religions in any depth is David Chidester's *Authentic*

Fakes. He writes that "in some cases, these playful engagements with religion seem

driven by serious intent, especially when intervening in the market economy, the

dominant arena for adjudicating authenticity, by highlighting the commodification of

religion and the religion of consumerism."[133] He then classifies virtual religions into

belief, anti-belief, practical, Christianesque, New Age, anti-cult, entertainment, market,

object and animal, and scientistic systems. I would argue that this statement and

taxonomy represent an embryonic form of the distinction between parody and satirical

religions and the typically American urge to distinguish fakery and authenticity that has

influenced the distinction. Because *Authentic Fakes* is more broadly focused on

American representational systems and unusual new religions (not just funny ones),

Chidester does not analyze virtual religions/joke religions in depth and therefore does not

arrive at the distinction that I have made between parody and the possibility of sincere

religious belief.

Chidester also foreshadows a necessary distinction between the religious trappings of

joke religions and their actual content. He writes that "some virtual religions on the

Internet display characteristic features of historical religions, such as founders, beliefs,

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[133] Chidester, pp. 196-197.

symbols, myths, and rituals that make them look like any other religion,"[134] but does not

take the analysis any further than that. It seems, however, from our survey of

Discordianism, Pastafarianism, and Duckism, that all joke religions are sincere in some

sense, even parody religions: adherents of joke religions genuinely believe in the

philosophical arguments that are hidden beneath the absurdity of the jokes. Whether the

creators and adherents of joke religions who participate in propagating absurdity realize it

or not, the purpose of the funny and often bizarre religious trappings—such as

Pastafarians claiming that Heaven has strippers and a beer volcano—is to catch the

attention of an audience and make them think critically about the way they view the

world. As Georg Feuerstein points out, varying degrees of enlightenment, or union with

God, are achieved by manipulating or transcending attention; many religions employ

techniques designed to rein in our wandering minds from being distracted by the

world.[135] And, as I have shown, humor—whether spiritual laughter, or profane,

carnivalesque laughter in the service of the spiritual domain—is an excellent method of

catching one's attention. Consciously or unconsciously, the creators and adherents of

joke religions have seized this technique and used it to make a serious statement: that

religion is often paradoxical, absurd, and sometimes dangerous. In this sense, the

question of whether people really believe in joke religions can be answered with a "Yes,"

for they do believe in the philosophy half-hidden behind the absurdist trappings.

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[134] Chidester, p. 197.
[135] Feuerstein, p. 177.

Historical context is, I believe, very important to developing an understanding of the why

and how of joke religions. Robert Anton Wilson writes that the reason that conspiracy

theory (and, I would add, other occulture topics) is so popular is because "we're

undergoing such tremendous social change. Everything people take for granted is

changing rapidly. This is because information flow is increasing faster than at any other

time in history."[136] Indeed, this postmodern world is often confusing and disturbing; the

only way to make sense of it, argue the adherents of joke religions, is either to laugh or to

cry. Instead of reacting in what they perceive to be a negative way to the world's

suffering, adherents embrace their madness and use it constructively. Future studies of

joke religions should research this point of view throughout history and attempt to answer

the question of whether joke religions could have come into being prior to the twentieth

century.

There are many other joke religions, all of which share similar worldviews and

characteristics. The Church of the SubGenius, for instance, reveres a fictional 1950s

salesman named J. R. "Bob" Dobbs, who wants your money; the Church of the Chocolate

Cake worships the Chocolatey Mistress; the Church of the Gerbil is at war with the

Church of the Cosmic Bunny; the Church of Google venerates the search engine

Google.com as the closest that humanity has ever come to directly experiencing God; and

so on. To include a detailed examination of these, in addition to Discordianism,

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[136] Richard Smoley and Jay Kinney, "Doubt! The Gnosis Interview with Robert Anton Wilson," in *Gnosis Magazine* No. 50 (Winter 1999), http://www.rawilsonfans.com/articles/DOUBT.htm, retrieved 28 April 2009.

Pastafarianism, and the Center for Duck Studies, would unfortunately take far more time than is available.

There are also a number of other academic sources that will benefit future studies of joke religions. Erik Davis's *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (New York: Harmony Books, 1998), which concludes that magic is technology's unconscious, should serve as the foundation for a study of the role of the Internet in the creation and spread of joke religions, and Georg Feuerstein's *Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Radical Teachings of Crazy-Wise Adepts, Holy Fools and Rascal Gurus* (New York: Arkana, 1990) will help to situate the role of spiritual humor in the tactics that joke religions use to transform the consciousness of their audiences. As noted in the Introduction, future research should also include folkloric concepts, the historical context of joke religions, and fieldwork.

The adherents of joke religions are "a tribe of philosophers, theologians, magicians, scientists, artists, clowns, and similar maniacs" who are intrigued with the relationship between the human and the divine and are unsatisfied with the overly-serious answers that institutional religions have provided. They take seriousness humorously and humor seriously.[137] I believe that the study of joke religions can and should provide a fresh perspective for religious studies and a much-needed dose of optimism for the whole world.

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[137] *Principia Discordia*, pp. 6, 8.

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