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JOKE RELIGIONS: MAKE-BELIEVE IN THE SANDBOX OF THE GODS¹

The Erisian revelation is not a complicated put-on disguised as a new religion, but a new religion disguised as a complicated put-on.

Robert Anton Wilson (1974)²

It's not that it's meaningless at all. There's a jumble of meanings

Ivan Stang (1985)

Since the mid-20th century, the college campuses of North America have been invaded every few years by the followers of strange new gods bearing exotic names like Ghu, Eris, Cthulhu, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and “Bob”. Their followers have proudly worn their bed-sheets as mystic robes and spray-painted bizarre images on the walls. They have written songs and handed out indecipherable pamphlets. They have engaged in public drunkenness and lit things on fire. In the past three decades, they have

¹ This article is based on presentations delivered at Kenyon College, 2 June 2007, and the “Future (in) Religion, Religion (in) Future” Conference at the Jagiellonian University, 4 December 2009. The author is indebted to Dr Heather Claussen for her helpful feedback and insight. The book-length study *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* by Carole M. Cusack was published in 2010 after the original manuscript was submitted. Although the ideas in this paper were developed independently, this topical book has been added to the bibliography for the benefit of readers. It is also worth noting that “Reverend Billy” and his Church of Stop Shopping have recently (2011) become prominent in the Occupy Movement as the “Church of Life After Shopping”.

² R.A. Wilson, *All Hail the Goddess Eris*, “Gnostica” July 1974, Vol. 3, No. 12, p. 19 as quoted in M. Adler *Drawing Down the Moon*, Boston 1986, p. 328.

brought their proselytism to the Internet, thereby extending their tentacles out to the furthest reaches of the globe. All in the name of 'joke religions'.

For the purposes of this article, 'joke religions' may be defined as: 'para-religious movements, invented primarily to amuse the authors and their audience, which extend beyond simple literary fiction to take on an approximation of many of the dimensions of real religious movements.' These joke religions exist at the juncture of two larger clusters of phenomena: religious humour and invented religions. However, they are more specific than merely the overlap between two other spheres. They have a style and set of themes and ambitions that are specific to them, and which can be traced throughout their history.

JOKE RELIGIONS AS RELIGIOUS HUMOUR

Without necessarily exhausting all of the possibilities, we can identify at least four types of religious humour:

1. Jokes involving religious characters, places, events, etc.
2. Humour that is an integral part of a religion or a religious worldview.
3. Religious parodies.
4. Religions that are jokes.

Jokes which involve religious characters, places or events do not necessarily need to be primarily about religion at all. Jokes of the general type of "A priest, a nun and a rabbi walk into a bar..."³ may be, in fact, simple puns or drawn-out shaggy dog stories. They only intend to be funny, not to deliver a religious message. However, many of them require some knowledge of the religion in question in order to understand the punchline. An example might be the Roman Catholic priest and the Mormon missionary who sit next to each other on a long plane flight and become friendly enough to ask each other about their religious failings. The priest asks the missionary whether he has tried coffee (Mormons should not drink coffee). The missionary admits with some embarrassment that he has, and then asks the priest if he has tried sex (Roman Catholic priests

³ ...and the barman says, "What is this? Some kind of joke?"

should be celibate). The priest admits with some embarrassment that he has. And the missionary asks, "Isn't it a whole lot better than coffee?"

Humour that is an integral part of a religion or a religious worldview is a much more complex matter. Some of this sort of humour is tied with specified holidays, such as the clowning and public misbehaviour associated with Roman Catholic Carnival or the mild drunkenness, pranks and noisemakers at Jewish Purim. Other examples of humour in this category include humorous stories (superficially similar to those in the first type) which are integral to the religion itself, such as Zen Buddhist koans which guide the listener to enlightenment, or even some of the Biblical parables and sayings.⁴ In some religions, there are also occasions of 'back channel' jokes and humorous commentary made by the 'congregation' during the rites that indicate that they are, in fact, paying attention to what is being said and done at centre stage, such as joking responses to religious toasts and libations made at Neo-Pagan rites.

Religious parodies must be created by people who know the religion intimately enough to be able to parody them and, most frequently, must be delivered to an audience who know them well enough to appreciate the jokes. Therefore, many religious parodies may be put into a subcategory that we can call the 'loving self-parody'. A classic example of 'loving self-parody' would be the vast collection of liturgical parodies produced in the European Middle Ages, including scripts for 'drinker's masses' where the worship of alcohol (as Bacchus or Lieus) was inserted into the framework of a Latin Mass. The mediaevalist Martha Bayles, who devoted a chapter to just a few examples of this once-popular genre, noted that

most involved in the religious life must have known the Mass by heart... [and] only those with Latin training could understand the meaning of the phrases, and so for the composition and appreciation of liturgical parody... we must restrict the circle of participants to those with a clerical education⁵.

⁴ The comic effect of some of these 'gags' is often ruined by po-faced delivery, but try for a moment to visualise the image of a rich man trying to get into Heaven in terms of a failed attempt to shove a big, hairy, squirming camel through the eye of a needle.

⁵ M. Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages: The Latin Tradition*, Ann Arbor 1996, p. 93.

In most cases, there is no reason to suspect the Christian authors of any kind of attack on Christianity, *per se*. The objects of their humour are typically drunken parish priests and gluttonous abbots; therefore the parody resembles the fraternal ribbing and jocularly of co-workers at the pub after work more than a serious attack. Of course, there are religious parodies of a second subcategory, which we may call the 'mocking satire'. The satirist uses humour to show somebody else's religion in an unflattering light. One such example was the mock-Hussite mass (revealing the Hussites to be secret devil-worshippers) that circulated in Roman Catholic circles in the 15th century.⁶ However, such forms are rare for at least two reasons: firstly, that in order to be created an appreciated mocking satire requires almost as much knowledge of the target as loving self-parody does, and secondly, that such satire frequently slides into angry vituperation and thereby loses any value as 'humour.'

The fourth type of religious humour, 'joke religions' (defined above), are often labelled as a type of parody (for example, on Wikipedia). Many of them have clearly started as such, with the SubGenii having started largely as a parody of the Scientologists and the Campus Crusade for Cthulhu having started largely as a parody of the Campus Crusade for Christ.⁷ However, groups that are truly a parody of a particular religion, belief, or practice are usually short-lived because the joke grows stale quickly. All of those joke religions that have sustained any appreciable amount of long-term interest have accreted elements that are not recognisably a parody of any particular religion, but at best could be called a parody of a chimerical 'religion-in-general'. And if they are to be treated as parodies, then the 'loving' and 'mocking' subtypes are often hopelessly tangled together in a way that is exceedingly rare in parodies of individual religions. It would be more honest to admit that some of the elements in joke religions are 'merely' jokes, not aimed at parodying any

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 122-124.

⁷ A largely North American Protestant phenomenon, the Campus Crusade for Christ is a conservative evangelical missionary organisation founded in 1951 to preach to university students. In Poland, it operates as Ruch Nowego Życia with a more Catholic-oriented programme.

'real' religion at all. On the other hand, some joke religions openly hope to guide their participants to laughing enlightenment in the manner of a Zen koan, thus participating in some of the goals of a 'real' religion. Therefore, joke religions may be said to be a specific kind of *mélange* of the other types of religious humour.

In spite of this wealth of types of religious humour, the mainstream of modern Western culture is often suspicious that any religious humour might be a sign of insult or blasphemy. Jokes about religion (much like jokes about sex or defecation) are likely to be reserved for mature friends in private situations where the teller can feel safe to violate 'the rules' of polite public behaviour without fear of repercussions. A quick 'warm-up joke' from the priest at the start of the Sunday sermon is of course an acceptable rhetorical technique, but a whole sermon that leaves everyone laughing in the aisles would seem out of place. However, a broader view shows that religious humour and religious seriousness have, in fact, often worked very closely together and that this closeness has been taken quite 'seriously' by some religious thinkers.

The philosopher Ignacio Götz was one of the few to devote an entire book to faith and humour⁸. In his work, Götz treated these two topics as not just tangentially overlapping spheres, but as fundamentally and closely linked coping reactions when faced with paradox. Again, this concept can be illustrated with a joke:

And Jesus went out, and he asked his disciples, saying unto them,
"Whom do men say that I am?"

And they answered, "John the Baptist, but some say Elias. And others,
one of the prophets".

And Jesus saith unto them, "But whom say ye that I am?"

And Peter answereth and saith unto him, "Thou art one person of a tri-
une monotheistic deity, being of one substance with the Father and the
Holy Ghost, begotten but not made, fully human but fully divine in hy-
postatic union".

And Jesus saith unto Peter, "...huh?!"⁹

⁸ I. Götz, *Faith, Humor, and Paradox*, Westport 2002.

⁹ Text adapted from the King James translation of Chapter 8 of the Gospel of Mark, with some additions from the Nicene Creed, etc.

Much of the impact of the joke relies on the fact that many religious beliefs cannot be easily comprehended in a purely rational manner. Devout Christians believe the claim that their deity is both one and three (at the same time) in a way that they would not accept a claim that there is both one and three apples on the table. In matters of religious dogma, the difference between the sublime and the ridiculous might be nothing more than the presence or lack of faith. Far from claiming that humour trivialises religion, Götz insisted that jokes are most funny when they touch on the most important topics, things like religion, politics and gender. Frivolity and emptiness, on the other hand, are dangerous to both true humour and true faith.

Patrick Laude drew his examples from Hinduism and Zen rather than the Western tradition that Götz examined, but he likewise reached the conclusion that religion and laughter are closely intertwined¹⁰. In Laude, laughter is a form of relief and unburdening, a stopping of rational thought and also a loss of self-control. He gave an example of simple slapstick which takes on religious meaning: a Zen master who achieved *satori* thanks to tripping and falling from the temple steps. The Zen master both literally and figuratively experienced an imbalance, followed by a change of perspective¹¹.

Perhaps the most famous theoretician of the relationship between humour and religion was Mikhail Bakhtin, whose *Rabelais and His World* (originally written in 1936) is a classic in the field. His conception of 'carnival' emphasises the links between the 'high' (religion, etiquette, power) and the 'low' (food, drink, defecation, sex, and violence) through a whole range of parodies, inversions and substitutions. Like Götz and Laude, Bakhtin felt that religion and humour had once been closely related, but Bakhtin added a historical claim that only recently had those ties weakened. With a kind of nostalgia he looked back to a time when "Carnival festivities and the comic spectacles and ritual connected with them had an important place in the life of medieval man... nearly eve-

¹⁰ P. Laude, *Divine Play, Sacred Laughter, and Spiritual Understanding*, New York 2005.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

ry Church feast had its comic folk aspect, which was also traditionally recognized".¹²

JOKE RELIGIONS AS INVENTED RELIGIONS

In addition to being a part of the broader spectrum of religious humour, 'joke religions' participate in an overlapping category of invented religion. We can enumerate at least four types of invented religions.¹³

1. Some portions of all religions.
2. 'Philosophical ideal' religions.
3. Intentionally fictional gods or religions.
4. Fraudulent gods or religions.

Most religions would not see themselves as 'invented religions' because they refer to a reality which they believe to transcend and/or pre-date the current form of the religion itself. They may acknowledge their founding revelation or enlightenment is recent or that their institutional organisation is new. But from an insider's point of view, their religious truths are not 'invented' by people but 'discovered' by them or 'revealed' to them. Even if we were to ignore the faith of the religion's adherents and take a sceptical outsider's viewpoint that some of these revelations might be delusions or misunderstandings, it would be difficult to speak of an 'invented religion' without some degree of deliberateness on the part of the inventors.

However, as far as the author is aware, there are no religions on planet Earth that make the claim that every minute detail of the sum of their

¹² M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington 1984, p. 5.

¹³ In some legal jurisdictions we can also find a special kind of registered religious Church which institutionally embraces a kind of radical universalist religion (*de facto* a refusal to invent much more than the institution itself), while allowing individual clergy freedom to invent their own religious beliefs and practices. The Universal Life Church (founded in 1959 in Modesto California) ordains ministers who have the power to perform valid marriages in many jurisdictions of the United States. The ordained clergy hold a wide range of beliefs: from mainstream American Protestantism, through smaller NRMS and on to Humanist Atheism. The ULC has also ordained individuals with their own self-developed notions about religion and participants in the Joke Religions described elsewhere in this paper. See, for example, Barner-Barry, *Contemporary Paganism and the Law: Non-Traditional Religion in America and the First Amendment*, Gordonsville 2005, pp. 102-103.

religious belief, iconography and practice has been directly received as revelation from a divine power. Private prayers and supplications, for example, are typically *ad hoc* deliberately created or modified by the believer according to their current needs or emotional states. The pattern on the priest's ritual vestments may be based on ancient iconography, but the artistic execution of the embroidery still belongs to the individual artist. Theologians may seek divine guidance, but few would dare claim that their every printed word has been dictated from above. Therefore, we can say that at least some portion of each religion is 'invented' by humans according to human needs.¹⁴

However, there are religious inventions that describe things as they 'should be' according to human reason without making claims that any degree of ancient tradition or divine revelation has taken place. The earliest noted case of such a 'philosophical ideal' re-writing of religion was the pre-Socratic philosopher Pherecydes of Syros who lived in the 6th century BCE. He heavily modified the traditional myths and gods of his time into new forms that intrigued and befuddled those who came after him. What little is still known about his system involved three eternal gods Chronos, Zas, and Chthonie (who are clearly forms of Kronos, Zeus and Gaia), three elements (fire, air, and water), and a rather obscure notion of five nooks or caves. All of creation was described as resulting from various combinations of these primordial beings and elements in these original 'places'.¹⁵

A more recent and familiar example would be William Blake's rich mythopoeia, inspired in part by Greek mythology, the Bible, and a variety of esoteric philosophies (including Swedenborg, alchemy, and Kabbalah), but also including personal friends, enemies and experiences in the brew. Rather than 'gods', Blake spoke of four Zoas, a neologism meaning "liv-

¹⁴ This sort of phenomena at the micro-level helps to illustrate the theoretical distinction between different sets of dichotomies: 'invented' vs. 'received' on the one hand and 'genuine' vs. 'spurious' on the other. An improvised request for divine intervention in battle could be genuinely invented, whereas an actor's reading of an ancient ritual text could be received and spurious.

¹⁵ H. Schibli, *Pherecydes of Syros*, Oxford 1990, pp. 14–15.

ing creatures” who are the essence of Mankind and the agents of History: Tharmas, Urizen, Lovah, and Urthona.¹⁶

We can also find examples of fictional gods and religions which were invented for purely aesthetic reasons or to provide a ‘background world’ for a work of humour, science fiction or fantasy. These ‘religions’ make absolutely no claims to represent any ultimate truth. Two of the earliest recorded examples of such fictional gods can be found in Aristophanes’ comedy *The Birds* which was first performed in 414 BCE in Athens. In addition to comic interpretations of the traditional gods, Aristophanes introduced a new god, ‘the god of the Triballians’ (or simply ‘Tribalos’ in some translations) who represented all of the uncultured and unintelligible gods of the wild barbaric tribes around the Greeks. He trips on his own gown and speaks utter gibberish and is created for no other purpose than comedic effect. Another ‘new god’ starts the play as the mortal Pisthetairos but reaches apotheosis by arrogant extortion of the gods and by marrying Zeus’ executive assistant, Basileia (or “Sovereignty”). It is worth noting that not only do these funny gods count as a type of religious humour, but that the performance of the comedy itself was a rite embedded in the context of a religious festival that included elements of Bakhtin-like carnival, with brandished phallic symbols and drunken parades.

A highly influential, but not nearly so famous author of fictional gods was Lord Dunsany (aka the Irish aristocrat Edward Plunkett, 1878–1957 CE) who rode the edge between humour and horror in his fantastic fiction. His populous theology ranged from a mighty slumbering *deus otiosus*, MANA-YOOD-SUSHAI (and his private attendant Skarl) down through the ‘Small Gods’ (the ones that humans looked up to, like Mung, the god of death), and the ‘Thousand Home Gods’ (such as Zumbiboo, the god of household dust). He also wrote a sort of meta-commentary on the human proclivity to invent new gods in the myth of the 100 gods of Mlideen. In that story the people of Mlideen invent pleasant new gods

¹⁶ *William Blake: the Complete Poems*, red. A. Ostriker, London 1977, p. 1048. A special case of such a religion would be Fred Adam’s ‘Feraferia’ religion which was invented based on Jungian archetypes and poetry. It was originally the work of a single human being (starting in 1956) with the expectation that it would someday be practiced, and to some extent, it is still active today.

every time they grow weary of their old gods. They are not aware that there are also older gods up in the hills over the city. When the total number of new gods reaches 100, the old gods let an avalanche wipe out the city and the whole process begins again from scratch. Dunsany's influence was acknowledged by many writers who came after him such as Lovecraft, Tolkien and Moorcock, all of whose religious inventions have received considerable discussion. In particular, the mind-numbing religious *horror* that Lovecraft's heroes typically experience when faced with eldritch and alien gods may be seen as the dark reflection of the sort of religious humour that Laude praised for bringing laughing *satori*.¹⁷

A seminal harbinger of the modern type of joke religions was the fictional religion of Bokononism invented by Kurt Vonnegut in the pages of a black comedy about religion and the destruction of world: *Cat's Cradle* (first published in 1963, with the Cuban Missile Crisis still fresh in mind). The aphorisms of this self-avowedly false but soothing religion, supposedly written by American con-man Lionel Boyd Johnson in his guise of 'Bokonon', are scattered throughout the book. One notable aspect of this religion is its abundant vocabulary of theological jargon, such as 'foma' (harmless lies that comfort the people), 'karass' (a group of people whose combined actions cause something important to happen, even though they may not be aware of the final effect or of their karass relationship), and 'granfalloon' (the reverse of a karass, a plurality of individuals who imagine themselves to be a community but don't have any real connection or common purpose). The most sacred rite of Bokononism was the 'boko-maru' – the union of soles.¹⁸ What could easily be a horror in the style of Lovecraft (depicting the futility and brevity of human life)

¹⁷ The joke religion Campus Crusade for Cthulhu is directly inspired by Lovecraft, but there are also serious devotees of the 'Necronomicon', a book seemingly invented by Lovecraft as fiction. There have been at least three serious-seeming occult works published under this title since Lovecraft's death. A 1977 book known as the "Simon Necronomicon" (and a 1980 German translation attributed posthumously to Eugen Grosche, who died in 1964), claims to be the original that Lovecraft's work is inspired by, and it has enjoyed some popularity in the occult milieu of Central Europe. The author recently (2010) received an invitation to a conference in Prague that included discussions of the occult system of the Necronomicon alongside other types of magic and Neo-Pagan practice.

¹⁸ A play on words: the 'meeting of souls' and the 'meeting of soles' (of the feet).

becomes comedy by suggesting that religion's true purpose is to take our minds off of our own pointlessness.¹⁹

Finally, we can postulate a type of invented religion which consists of insincere frauds. Their creators recognise them as 'fictional', but they expect their flocks to believe in them as genuine. They exist to bring money and power to those in control. Many real-world religions have been accused of belonging to this class, usually by sceptical outsiders or by disenchanted former members who have spent their lives and fortunes on a religion that did not give them spiritual satisfaction in return. Lucian of Samosata recorded an example which is sufficiently distant in time not to offend any readers today: the worship of the snake-god 'Glycon of Abonoteichus' in the second half of the 2nd century CE. The man behind this fraud was Alexander 'the Prophet' who constructed a puppet from a linen mask and the body of a real snake. With the use of a variety of tricks and slight-of-hand, the puppet delivered astounding prophesy that helped Alexander's religious career, as well as his chances to sleep with all of the attractive young girls and boys in the town. The extent of the charade was only revealed when the miracle-working Prophet unexpectedly died from a leg infection.²⁰

Joke religions of the sort described in this article are clearly not claiming the kind of religious truth that would qualify them as an outright fraud. Nor are they made of the small-scale inventions that go on as a part of everyday performance of 'real' religions. As a whole, they are properly considered a special kind of openly fictional religions akin to Bokomonism or Zumbiboo. However, in keeping with Götz's claim that real humour must have some depth, the most persistent and popular joke religions seem to be those that border closely on the 'philosophical ideal' type. They

¹⁹ See also note 21, below for science fiction religions which have become 'real world' religions.

²⁰ *Selected Satires of Lucian*, ed. & trans. L. Casson, New York 1968, pp. 267–300. What bothered Lucian was that Alexander convinced the gullible that his fiction was true. Lucian himself was not above creating fictional religious content (with a wink and a nudge) in the mould of Aristophanes for comic effect. His 'True Story' is a long tall tale that includes strange new revelations about the afterlife as well as dubious moral precepts such as "not to poke fires with a sword, eat beans, or make love to boys over eighteen" (*ibidem*, p. 45).

do not so much claim that their absurd deities and carnival rites directly represent how things 'should be' but they do seem to indicate, with an ironic wave of the hand, the general direction where that might be.

One of the things that makes joke religions stand out from other forms of fictional religions (such as Bokononism) is that they are not merely textual, but spill out into other dimensions of religious behaviour and function. Relatively recent developments such as the rapid dissemination of joke religion texts via the Internet have helped to obscure this fact.²¹ Whereas the readers of *Cat's Cradle* can each read the book as a 'private' communication directly from the author, the participants of MOOism created their religion in a social interaction: in online chats, forums and emails. Most (if not all) of the joke religions have had some of their rites acted out, often with elaborate temple sets and liturgical garments. This goes back to the performed humour of the medieval carnival that Bakhtin so admired: "Carnival... does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people, they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people."²² According to the 'stage directions' that accompany at least one copy, even the medieval 'drinking mass' liturgical parodies were acted out by their ('really' clerical) participants.²³

Joke religion 'rites' often incorporate elements from other forms of entertainment, from theatre to rock concerts. They have sometimes been classified under the appropriately broad umbrella term 'performance art'.²⁴ The journalist Jay Kinney observed a diverse gathering of participants at a 'Devival' event in 1985 in San Francisco, California. They included "bands from San Francisco, singers and preachers from Dallas

²¹ Richard Smith, in his Masters Thesis, for example, borrows a concept from Stark and Bainbridge to categorise joke religions as a kind of 'audience cult'. While this would be appropriate for some joke religions at some phase in their development (usually a phase *after* interaction and invention has ceased and a printed book or website has been made from the results), like the proverbial tip of the iceberg, it does not attend to the much larger and longer phase in which there are few, if any, passive audiences.

²² M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²³ M. Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages...*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

²⁴ L.F. Burnham, *High Performance, Performance Art and Me*, "The Drama Review" 1986, Vol. 30, No. 1, p. 17.

[Texas], an intense character in shades from back East who calls himself ‘the Pope of All New York’ and a smattering of artists, go-fers, and borderline basketcases” not to mention a preacher who “mows lawns for a living in Little Rock, Arkansas”.²⁵ The student newspaper of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology rather blandly described the performances of their local ‘tentacle’ of the Campus Crusade for Cthulhu as including “‘rituals,’ which are generally pyrotechnic stage performances, and readings of Lovecraft’s writings. ...A ritual can get a turnout of about 50 people. One ritual the club orchestrates every other year is a ‘virgin sacrifice.’”²⁶

THE PLETHORA OF JOKE RELIGIONS

One of the stunning things about joke religions is how many of them there have been. The following is just a few of the more notable examples²⁷ and their dates of the first public appearance:

Ghughuism (c.1942)

The Reformed Druids of North America (1963)

Discordianism/Erisianism (1965)

First Arachnid Church/Spiderism (1974)

Javacrucians (1974)

Wombat Wicca (1978)

Church of the Subgenius (1979)

Church of Beaver Cleaver (1981)

Campus Crusade for Cthulhu (c.1982)

²⁵ J. Kinney, *Backstage with Bob: Is the Church of the Subgenius the Ultimate Cult?* [in:] *The Fringes of Reason*, ed. T. Schultz, New York 1989, p. 209.

²⁶ J. Keuss, J. Krishnan, *Some Lesser-Known Groups at the Institute: Campus Crusade for Cthulhu*, “The Tech” Vol. 121, No. 37, 28 August 2001, p. 7.

²⁷ Selected on the basis of known influence and/or publication. Quite a number of cases of ‘ghods’ [sic] have been produced in the Science Fiction fazine and filk scenes. Most did not build an elaborate para-religion nor were they often noticed outside of their community. Only Spiderism is known to have caught the attention of outsiders like Margot Adler and Robert Anton Wilson. Among the many scifi fannish ghods, Ghu, FooFoo and Roscoe are noteworthy of predating the rise of other joke religions and therefore may have had some influence on their development. Only the early example of Ghu is treated below.

Otisianism/Intergalactic House of Fruitcakes (1988)
 MOOism (1991)
 Church of Stop Shopping (1997)²⁸
 Pastafarianism/Flying Spaghetti Monster (2005)
 Dudeism (2006)

New joke religions are created every few years. Many of them probably never achieve enough fame to be noticed by outsiders or remembered for more than a few years past their ephemeral life-spans. Some have, however, caught the attentions of scholars. J. Gordon Melton listed joke religions like the Erisians among the types of Neo-Paganisms found in the United States.²⁹ The journalist Margot Adler, likewise writing about American Pagans, devoted a thoughtful and amusing chapter entitled “Religions of Paradox and Play” to the Reformed Druids and Erisians.³⁰ Richard Smith’s otherwise unpublished Master’s Thesis which has been circulated on the Internet in a pdf form suggests that rather than ‘joke religions’, movements like the Church of the SubGenius should be called ‘neophilic irreligions’.³¹ Perhaps the apogee of academic interest was reached in 2007 when an impressive total of three papers were presented at the prestigious annual conference of the American Academy of Religion on the then newly-popular Flying Spaghetti Monster.³²

Another intriguing aspect of joke religions is how closely concentrated they are in time and space. With the possible exception of Ghughuism, they

²⁸ Groups such as the Church of Stop Shopping could arguably be defined as a ‘joke denomination’ of an existing religion, Christianity. Likewise, Wombat Wicca never moved beyond seeming to be a parody form of the Neo-Pagan Wicca movement (note the alternate spellings). The New Reformed Druids of North America, in spite of some inspiration from the ancient Celtic Druids, were largely a new invention which, over time, inspired the creation of many of the serious streams of North American Neo-Pagan Druidry (see below).

²⁹ J. G. Melton, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Paganism in America: A Bibliography*, New York 1982.

³⁰ M Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, Boston 1986.

³¹ R. Smith, *Neophilic Irreligions: Audience Cults and the World Wide Web*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis in Sociology, University of Virginia 1996 [pdf retrieved 24 May 2007].

³² See G. Van Horn, L. Johnston, *Evolutionary Controversy and a Side of Pasta: The Flying Spaghetti Monster and the Subversive Function of a Religious Parody*, “Golem: Journal of Religion and Monsters”, Spring 2007, Vol. 2, Issue 1 [pdf version retrieved 16 November 2009].

have appeared after the Second World War. All of the notable cases began in North America and remain most popular there, although some have 'proselytised' other countries. This strongly suggests that joke religions are a kind of response to specific social questions or needs. One such element must be the doubts that arose after the war about the old 'grand narratives' which allowed public criticism of things that had rarely been criticised before. While this may have increased the ability to laugh at religion in general, for conservatives it probably decreased the palatability of 'self-parodies' which could further damage their already precarious position. There was also a rise in religious diversity, especially among the New Religious Movements, many of which seemed strange and absurd to an unprepared audience. Part of the humour of groups like the Church of the SubGenius is to be found in replicating the shock that outsiders feel when first faced with NRMs and leaving them with the uncomfortable worry that perhaps their neighbourhood has been invaded by brainwashed individuals who give all their money to "Bob" in exchange for spiritual 'slack'.

The post-war demographic 'boom' combined with the search for new meanings and youthful rebellion turned into waves of popular counterculture in the form of Beatniks, Hippies and Punks, all of whom embraced the joke religions of their times as a part of their self-ironic ideologies. Such jokes were often a protest against the fossilised forms and rigid hierarchies of the established Churches, without necessarily being critical of religious experience *per se*. The participants could be said to be 'playing at religion' while ignoring the rules of the game. On the whole, therefore, joke religions may be answering (at least in part) the need to explore the absurdities of both traditional and non-traditional religiosity in a non-threatening framework.

In addition to catering for certain needs, there are specific conditions that must be met for a joke religion to come about. Freedom of speech (especially about sensitive topics like religion) is a prerequisite for any joke religion to flourish, and in the mid 20th century North America stood out as a bastion of this right.

The availability of cheap and accessible reproduction technology is a requirement for any of these joke religions to move beyond being

simply the in-joke of a small circle of friends. The photocopying machine became both common and reasonably inexpensive to use in the United States in the 1960s and quickly turned into an invaluable tool for producing everything from radical student manifestos to collage art. By 1979 'photocopy art' was established enough for the first retrospective gallery exhibit to be shown to the public.³³ The early 'chronicles', laws and ritual scripts of the Reformed Druids were transferred by mimeograph and later by photocopy. The first 1965 edition of the *Principia Discordia* was likewise 'published' on a photocopying machine. Early SubGenius pamphlets and zines were created on photocopy machines with bits of clip art and old advertisements.

In some cases the popularity of the 'cheap-and-cheerful' photocopies was high enough to interest 'traditional' publishers in producing proper books. Rip-Off Press (a small press best known for its 'underground comix') produced a version of the *Principia Discordia* in 1970 that achieved fame in the psychedelic scene in San Francisco. It was followed by at least six further editions in English,³⁴ as well as translations into several languages including Polish and Russian. One of Rip-Off Press's best-known comix artists of the late 1970s, Paul Mavrides, brought a level of impressive graphics professionalism to the production of the *Book of the SubGenius* (1983) published by educational publisher McGraw-Hill (reprinted in a more successful Simon & Schuster edition in 1987).

1988 was a watershed year for bringing joke religions to the nascent Internet. It fell in the period in which many US universities began to routinely assign BITnet accounts to students outside of computer science and physics. The potential number of online participants rose quickly and in 1988 the older joke religions such the Church of the SubGenius and the Discordians established a beachhead on the proto-net in the form of

³³ J.A. Walker, *Copy This! A Historical Perspective on the Use of the Photocopier in Art*, "Plagiarism: Cross-Disciplinary Studies in Plagiarism, Fabrication, and Falsification" 2006, Vol. 1, p. 22.

³⁴ The *Principia Discordia* is the origin of the 'all rites reversed' phrase that was later picked up by software authors for materials that may be freely copied and distributed. As a public domain work, there are many editions and many online copies.

Usenet newsgroups like alt.slack and alt.discordia.³⁵ However, it was not easy to communicate on the pre-html Internet the stunning graphics of the *Book of the SubGenius*, or the chaotic collages of the *Principia Discordia*. Two of the new groups that were formed at that time flourished with the help of the new interactive and collaborative possibilities offered by the pre-html Internet. Otisianism started in 1988 in Williamsburg, Massachusetts as a 'traditional' photocopy art weekly mailing sent out through the postal networks of the zine scene of the 1980s, but quickly moved its focus to 'The Purple Thunderbolt of Spode' an electronic newsletter with active contributors from campuses across the United States. An even more momentous change can be seen in the creation of MOOism almost entirely from its inception in 1991 as a collaborative online project (first on FidoNet and then in the Gopher protocol that preceded the html world-wide web).

Since the turn of the 21st century, online creation appears to be the default mode for newcomers like Pastafarianism, which achieved almost overnight international success as an InterNet 'meme' in 2005. As Bobby Henderson, the author of what started as a letter to the Kansas School Board, described it:

Within days of posting it online, the letter became an internet phenomenon, generating tens of thousands of visits each day, as well as personal responses from the school board members themselves. To date (August 2006), the website has received upwards of 350 million hits, and somewhere in the proximity of 15 million unique visits.³⁶

Similarly to what the photocopy machine had done earlier for groups like the Discordians, the new technology allowed the nascent group to reach beyond an immediate circle of face-to-face peers with very little monetary expenditure. The quantum leap in the speed of dissemination, however, has also changed something in the way in which such joke re-

³⁵ By at least 1986, Discordians, Wombat Wicca, SubGenii and Church of Beaver Cleaver were present on FidoNet, a decentralised system of linked PC-based bulletin boards that preceded the civilian Internet in popularity. BITNET and Usenet were centralised systems that included mainframes and tended to be focused on University campuses. Usenet technically remains separate today, but in practice it is subsumed into the Internet.

³⁶ R. Henderson, *Comment on the Open Letter*, 2006, <http://www.venganza.org/about/open-letter/discussion/> [retrieved 31 May 2007].

ligions develop. With slower dissemination there is a longer period of incubation of ideas and each new generation of participants has more opportunities for feedback into the development of the joke before the joke reaches a significant level of popularity. Internet memes, on the other hand, move too quickly (in the so-called 'Internet time') for much reflection to go into the first visible release of a joke religion. Based on the example of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, it appears that joke religions which start on the Internet are inclined to reverse the development structure of the earlier jokes: first they appear as 'audience cults', then they develop a larger and more complex textual and iconographic lore, and finally they develop ritual and social dimensions.

A SELECTION OF INFLUENTIAL JOKE RELIGIONS

The joke religion of Ghughuism appeared in the early 1940s (possibly as a private joke before the war) in the New York Futurian circle of science fiction authors and fans. There is very little of its original material available today with which it could be assessed, and the scriptures – the *Gholy Ghible* – may never have existed in more than three copies of 30 to 40 pages.³⁷ Nonetheless, Ghughuism appears to have had a number of traits of the later joke religions, such as assigning a Church-like hierarchy to its members and a specialised jargon (mostly made up of substituting the letters "gh" for the beginnings of words). The followers were early users of the reproduction technology available at the time, leading later fan lore to treat Ghu as the ghod of ditto machines and take mauve-purple (the colour of ditto pigment) as his gholy colour. Ghughuism continues to have a slight influence on science fiction fandom today, mostly in the form of various successor cults, but it is largely unknown outside of those circles.

The Reformed Druids of North America were the first joke religion to achieve any degree of fame outside of their immediate social group. They began in 1963 as a humorous protest against Carlton College's regulation that students must attend regular religious services in at least 7 out of 10 weeks in the semester. Because the regulation did

³⁷ J. Merril, E. Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved: The Life of Judith Merril*, Toronto 2002, p. 47.

not specify which religions counted as 'regular', the students created what was intended to be an obviously absurd religion. However, in order to satisfy the rule, the religious services of the new religion needed to be acted out.

Weekly rituals were dutifully held on Saturday afternoons in the Arboretum from May 1963 to June 1964 with most members coming from KARL radio workers, theater, computer and folk dance enthusiasts. It was a group of friends meeting outdoors and having a good time together while meditating on religion.³⁸

An important part of these rites was the consumption of 'waters-of-life', that is, Irish whiskey, which was one of the few obviously Celtic aspects of the Druids' services. They borrowed freely from all religions that were available to the students, including frequent use of zen koans. At least a month's worth of performance of these rituals preceded the first written liturgical rubrics, the first constitution, and the first scriptures.³⁹

The rule that the original Reformed Druids had been protesting was struck from the books in 1964. To the surprise of many of the founders, the Reformed Druids continued at Carlton after the protest had been successful. Around 1967, the Reformed Druids again became a kind of protest movement when one of their members, Richard Smiley, argued that he could not be drafted to serve in Viet-Nam because he was a 'Third Order priest' in the Reformed Druids.⁴⁰ In 1968, the influential Berkeley Grove was founded in California by Carlton alumnus Robert Larson, which was joined in 1972 by a Neo-Pagan activist Isaac Bonewits, signalling a distinct turn towards 'real' religion, albeit without losing too much of its humorous origins. In 1974, with tongue in cheek, one of the breakaway 'semi-serious' groups named themselves 'The Hasidic Druids' and repeatedly referred to their 'druish' faith.

The fame of the Reformed Druids was easily eclipsed by the cult following Discordianism which made its first public appearance in

³⁸ I. Bonewits, R. Larson, M. Scharding, *A Reformed Druid Anthology*, Northfield 1996 [pdf version retrieved 31 May 2007], p. 339.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 340–342.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 345–346.

1965 (but was claimed by its founders Kerry Thornley – aka Omar – and Greg Hill – aka Mal – to have been invented as a private joke in 1958 or 1959). After a textbook theophany of the Classical Greek goddess Eris (in a bowling alley), the two men respond in a rather un-classical manner:

Omar began to giggle. Mal began to laugh. Omar began jumping 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...⁴¹

The goddess Eris and her holy text the *Principia Discordia* began to reach a wider audience with the third edition (1970) and was further trumpeted by Shea and Wilson's successful science-fiction-conspiracy-comedy *Illuminatus!* Trilogy (written 1969–1971 but not published until 1975), which in turn inspired a popular role-playing card game in 1981. The close relationship between 'funny' Discordianism and its 'serious' relatives in Chaos Magic and goddess-worshiping Neo-Paganism has been noted and commented on, most fully by Margot Adler.⁴²

The ancient goddess Eris was obviously not invented by Thornley and Hill, but whereas Greek sources treated her as a negative influence to be avoided (discord), the new Discordians interpreted her as a liberator from the shackles of convention. Other pre-existing tropes that were re-purposed for the Discordian mythos included the golden apple (which precipitated the Judgement of Paris and the Trojan War), 'Emperor' Joshua Norton (a famous eccentric in 19th century San Francisco) and the Bavarian Illuminati (an 18th century secret society).

In contrast to the Neo-Pagan themes of Discordianism, the Church of the Subgenius and its charismatic (but almost never seen in person) leader, J. R. "Bob" Dobbs, delved primarily into the world of UFO cults, self-improvement schemes, and the seamy underside of televangelists and the Prosperity Gospel. Their first public appearance as a joke religion was in pamphlets parodying Scientology (1979), although the

⁴¹ G. Hill, K. Thornley, *Principia Discordia*, Port Townsend 1979, p. 4. Note that the pagination in this volume is, appropriately, chaotic and unsystematic. The page in question is the second one labelled as '4' and it is the 12th page that follows the title page.

⁴² M. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon...*, *op. cit.*

name 'Bob Dobbs' had previously been used for an unrelated character in a short film in 1977.⁴³

Perhaps more so than the Discordians, the early SubGenii emphasised live performance as an important part of the joke. Their signature performance piece was the 'rant': a long, unstructured and passionate speech reminiscent of fire-and-brimstone tent revival preachers, sometimes descending into incoherent diatribes or even glossolalia. Punk and New Wave music concerts were also frequently on the bill. The "Night of Slack" event in 1984 climaxed with the fake-bloody on-stage assassination of J.R. "Bob" Dobbs himself.

The strong iconography of the Church of the SubGenius, especially the grinning 'Dobbshead', has made it a popular element in graffiti, stencil and sticker art, as well as background cameos in television and film, most notably frequent appearances in the *Pee-wee's Playhouse* series (1986–1990). The SubGenii also introduced a lexicon of jargon including 'slack' (the accrued spiritual leeway owned by a participant) and 'pinks' (all of the 'other' people who didn't understand the joke).⁴⁴

While the Church of the SubGenius was fond of eclectic juxtapositions created by multiple authors, the joke religions created at the start of the era of the Internet sped up that process and quickly produced baroque theologies that became too complex for any one participant to master. The Intergalactic House of Fruitcakes started (1988) with a small roster of four gods – Otis, Lotus, Rhotos and Spode – and acquired new deities on an almost weekly basis for every possible function by a round-robin process conducted by email, IRC and finally a html webpage. Some of the participants wrote fictionalised versions of themselves into complex fantasies, thrown together with pop culture references and ancient mythology. A similarly anarchic online experiment was MOOism, which was (1991) probably the first joke religion created

⁴³ Douglas Smith (aka 'Ivan Stang'), the director of the film, has also claimed to have produced an early mimeograph document 'the Bulldada Book' which does not seem to be the same as any later SubGenius publications but may have contributed to the later mythos where the concept of 'bulldada' appears.

⁴⁴ See, for example, J. Dobbs, *The Book of the Subgenius*, New York 1983.

exclusively in an electronic medium (Fidonet).⁴⁵ Even more inclined to cut-and-paste mash-ups of both serious religion and all of the joke religions that preceded them, its motto was: "Do What Thou Wilt Shall Be The Whole Of The Law, Unless Thou Wilt Not Follow The Law, In Which Case Don't."⁴⁶

The joke religion that appears to enjoy the greatest visibility at the time of this writing (2010) is Pastafarianism/Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. It was created in 2005 by Bobby Henderson as a one-off joke in a letter of protest against teaching 'intelligent design' (that is, Creationism) in Kansas schools. To his surprise, when he posted a copy of the letter on his website it struck a chord and received international attention. Many of the tenets of this new faith were textbook examples of logical fallacies in science, e.g. the dogma that 'pirates stave off global warming' (based on the undeniable fact that when there were more pirates there was also less global warming) is an illustration of *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. Thanks to the pirate joke included in the original letter, Pastafarians later adopted as their own the previously-existing joke holiday (1996) of 'Talk Like a Pirate Day'.

Having already reached Internet celebrity status with a very short document, Henderson was offered a large advance to write a book *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*⁴⁷ for the Villard imprint of Random House. In a reversal of the order of development in the case of earlier groups, costumes and performed rites followed both the internet meme and the published book. Many of the later expansions of the original joke, including the rites, fell into a kind of religious 'mad-lib' where the forms and structures were borrowed faithfully from the phrasal templates of 'real' religions, but puns and mis-matched words were substituted for the original semantic values. Thus, Pastafarians may conclude their rites by intoning "Ramen" in place of "Amen".

⁴⁵ The 'Invisible Pink Unicorn' appeared at least a year earlier, but largely remained a rhetorical example, rather than a joke religion proper.

⁴⁶ www.churchofmoo.com/bookmoo/Book_MOO.txt [retrieved 27 February 2012].

⁴⁷ R. Henderson, *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, New York 2006.

THEMES IN JOKE RELIGIONS

To sum up this survey of a rather diverse field, a number of intellectual themes and modes of behaviour may be identified which are shared across the various joke religions. Some of these may simply be the obvious result of the overlap of the categories in which such groups fall, such as religious humour and invented religions. Others, however, are less obvious and more specific to this particular species of para-religious behaviour and therefore may point towards the motivations of those who participate in them.

Clearly, in order to be recognised as a joke religion, any such activity must be primarily humorous. Without laughter there would be little sense in engaging in such activity at all. We may note here the relative paucity of acting out similar, but serious, un-believed religions.⁴⁸ Humour, however, comes in many types and may include jokes with semi-serious intent: the play-acting that allows individuals to explore new roles, the carnival celebration of both high and low elements in life, or the emotional catharsis that comes from laughter.

Joke religions are usually collaborations resulting in highly heterogeneous compositions. Many participants take elements of meaning to themselves (not always restricted to religion, magic or folklore) and 'throw them into the hat' in the manner of a round-robin or an 'exquisite corpse'. At the most shallow level this results in pastiche and humorous juxtaposition. On a deeper level, it creates chimeras and paradoxes that inspire new thinking. As Van Horn and Johnston wrote in their study of the Flying Spaghetti Monster: "mixing categories and violating boundaries is a primary characteristic of monsters, and many of the scholars

⁴⁸ Outside of science fiction and fantasy films and television shows, perhaps the only common places in which non-joke invented religions are fully acted out would be in role-playing games (especially LARP performances) or in works of performance art and experimental theatre (for example, the work of Grotowski). Some religions created in works of "insincere" fiction such as "the Church of All Worlds" in the novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) have crossed over into being sincerely believed religions, albeit with significant modification. In some cases such as Lovecraft's Necronomicon (see above) or the Jedi Religion featured in the film "Star Wars" (1977), both joke and sincerely-believed versions have arisen.

who theorize about monsters underscore the liminal and transgressive cultural functions of mythical beasts and deities."⁴⁹

Similar to some other forms of invented religion, joke religions can at times incorporate elements of deception. However, unlike a religious scam designed to defraud money or usurp power, joke religions are akin to practical jokes and hoaxes where in order to be funny the falsity must be revealed to at least some portion of the audience. Most are far too outré to fool very many people into believing that they represent a 'real' threat for very long.

Joke religions are creative processes. In this they are a continuation of the artistic mythopoeia of Blake and Dunsany. The moment of invention is the crucial period in the lifecycle of a joke religion and successful ones extend that process for as long as possible. As has been noted by Smith, the participants in joke religions are neophilic. To be a contributor is a desirable role and to be mere 'audience' is less desirable. This goes a long way towards explaining why new joke religions are frequently invented, and why the participants are not satisfied only with purchasing reprints of the already complete older religions.

Joke religions usually incorporate some elements of parody, both of specific religions and of religion in general. Thus the lavish praise for "Bob's" achievements parallels the adoring hyperbole of the biography of L. Ron Hubbard as found in Scientologist literature. But these are grotesque reflections in a funhouse mirror. Unlike traditional parody, they have deviated wildly from their original models so that it is not really necessary to know who "Bob" was based in order for "Bob" to be funny. At times, this can drop down to the level of mockery and insult, but such types of criticism are rare because they are rarely funny.

Many joke religions have begun as a type of protest. Specifically, the Reformed Druids of North America protested against a college regulation and the Flying Spaghetti Monster was a protest against changes to a school curriculum. More generally, the counterculture environment of the Erisian scene or the hacker mentality of MOOism can be seen as

⁴⁹ G. Van Horn, L. Johnston, *Evolutionary Controversy and a Side of Pasta...*, op. cit., p. 2.

a revolt against the accepted paradigms of their times. The public parades, pyrotechnical shows and street-corner preachings of many groups could be seen as a kind breaching experiment in the style of Harold Garfinkel.⁵⁰ We should remember that there is some sort of communication about ‘what is wrong’ at the heart of any protest, no matter how humorous. This communication may indicate that the protesters wish to completely discard a given notion (such as Intelligent Design), but often it is a cry for the reform of something that is worth saving, e.g. when the Reformed Druids protested the mandatory and institutionalised nature of religion on their campus by participating in non-institutionalised religious behaviour. This calls attention to a significant ethical core hidden inside the ‘jokes’, an approximation of the important ethical dimension of ‘real’ religious movements.

Finally, many joke religions aspire to be enlightening. Their humour dwells close to the irrational truths of mysticism. Like a koan or a pratfall from the temple steps, they might nudge the hearer a little closer to *satori*. As one of the original Carlton Reformed Druids, Robert Larson, later wrote:

As a class, we druids tend to discuss trivial matters seriously and serious things jokingly. Often the difference between a serious belief and a joke is obscure, even to the writer. (I’ve maintained that many serious things are jokes, and jokes can be very serious, indeed.)⁵¹

Even among those who shun the notion of hidden religious truths in their work, we can find a didactic purpose. The rambling screeds of MOOism often propagate the hacker mentality of free access and decentralisation and Henderson’s textbook list of logical fallacies is designed to show the Kansas Board of Education the error of their ways.

⁵⁰ “Reverend Billy” of the Church of Stop Shopping noted “We call it a ‘radical performance community’. ...if you come to the ‘Fabulous Worship’ of our church, if it’s a strong outing, then you don’t know for quite a while what to call it. Maybe the next day you might say it’s politics, it’s spirituality or it’s art. You might say it’s all three, eventually. But if you say it’s any one of those very quickly, in the course of the experience, then we’re not doing our job” (*Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping: An Interview with Bill Talen*, “Multinational Monitor” Jul/Aug 2008, Vol. 30, No. 1, p. 45).

⁵¹ I. Bonewits, R. Larson, M. Scharding, *A Reformed Druid Anthology*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

THE FUTURE OF JOKE RELIGIONS

All of these themes are as fundamental to the 21st century as they were to the Reformed Druids of Carleton in 1963. If the underlying questions have not been made obsolete, then there is no reason to assume that joke religions will be going away any time soon.

There are at least three predictions about the future of joke religions that may be made at this point. The first is that the cycle of creation of new joke religions is certain to continue for at least the near future. The second is that the Internet will continue to play an important role in the creation of joke religions, therefore future development processes are likely to resemble that of Pastafarianism in which a popular internet meme is later expanded into a full joke religion. Thirdly, the Internet is already providing 'audience' experience of joke religions to new individuals around the world (for example, in Poland) with rather different religious experiences from those of 20th century North America. In the coming years, the Internet will also allow them to express their experiences in new joke religions invented on a global scale.

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STRESZCZENIE

Religie parodystyczne (*joke religions*) można zdefiniować jako: „ruchy parareligijne, które powstały przede wszystkim dla rozbawienia ich twórców oraz odbiorców, a które wykraczają poza zwykłą fikcję literacką i przyjmują formę zbliżoną do wielu wymiarów prawdziwych ruchów religijnych”. Od lat 60. pojawiło się już wiele ruchów humorystycznych tego rodzaju. Wykorzystanie religii parodystycznych jako sposobu na wyrażenie moralnego protestu wskazuje na ważny etyczny rdzeń ukryty w głębi „parodii”. W innych przypadkach *joke religions* mogą mieć na celu dostarczenie, za sprawą humoru, rzeczywistego religijnego lub filozoficznego wglądu. Jeśli kwestie, które poruszają religie parodystyczne, nie tracą wkrótce na aktualności, można się spodziewać, że obecny wzrost popularności religii tego typu nie skończy się zbyt szybko.

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