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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PARODY RELIGIONS

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Table of Contents

Introduction

"ARISE, MUTANTS!"

These ominous, bold-printed words greet the visitor to the official website of the Church of the SubGenius in the spring of 2021. Two campgrounds in Ohio and Florida are home to the church's 24th X-Day: the SubGenius World Destruction Event, or "Rupture," on which the alien race of Xists will come to earth on their spaceships and save the SubGenii from the end of the world. When one scrolls down the webpage, it becomes clear that "X-Day" has been an annual event since the first predicted Rupture was supposed to happen in 1998. Nearly half a century after the creation of the Church of the SubGenius, members are still connecting with each other, either in real life or online. Visiting their website or reading about the church for the first time might be somewhat confusing: who are these Xists? What is a SubGenius? Isn't the well-known end-time event spelled "rapture"?

The Church of the SubGenius is one of many invented parody religions that have popped up since the end of the 21st century, setting up home in cyberspace and accruing followers along the way. These distinct religions, often with catchy and humorous names such as the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster or the United Church of Bacon, confuse people who expect religion to be primarily concerned with spirituality or communication with the divine. If not about those things, what are these religions about? Why are they created, and how have these religions gained such popularity and so many loyal followers who are willing to engage with their subject matter for decades? This thesis aims to answer these questions by analyzing two parody religions: the Church of the SubGenius (CoSG) and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM).

The current academic research has not focused enough on the interest of parody religions. It has not thoroughly explored why it is necessary for parody religions to look like "real" religions and the ways in which they establish this similarity, how they construct their mythology and concepts in accordance with their goals and interests. More research is also needed to examine why some parody religions are so effective at attaining popularity and keeping followers engaged.

Grasping the relevance, existence, and success of parody religions will help us more broadly understand the production and authorization of religion in line with central disciplinary concerns in the study of religion (Sutcliffe and Cusack 2013, 3). Moreover, it will highlight the real-life consequences of a lack of a sound definition of religion and the problems relating to the working legislative definitions of countries which are based on a traditional understanding of religion. This undertaking will grant insight into the difficulties

associated with the growing religious diversity in (Western) countries and will stimulate a critical reassessment of the special or privileged status of religion in these societies and what this status is based on. Parody religions tug at the fabric of established, taken-for-granted categories -both in the academia and society- that most people are uninterested in reassessing and interrogating. Whether they are seen as elaborate jokes or as sincere religious endeavors, studying these religions offers opportunities for examining both the creation and legitimation of religion and the at times uncomfortable difficulties that accompany the concept.

This thesis explores what makes a parody religion successful by analyzing what it argues to be the two main aspects of parody religions: interest of critique (1) and catchy concepts (2). Interest of critique is defined as the desire to critique certain practices or beliefs, social or cultural frameworks, moral assumptions or (practical or other) consequences attached to the label 'religion.' Catchy concepts encompass those concepts that are more cognitively optimal: concepts which by their properties are better than others in embedding in the human mind. This thesis argues that successful parody religions need to have both elements in order to succeed as cultural commentary and to generate engagement.

Corpus selection

The corpus that is analyzed in this thesis is comprised of mostly digital primary sources supported by a host of secondary literature. As this thesis aims to explore what makes parody religions successful, the most prominent sources include those channels that the parody religions used as a case study for this thesis (CoSG and FSM) employ to communicate their ideas to a broader audience. Parody religions are uniquely tied to and proliferated on the Internet, and are accordingly dubbed "virtual religions" and "indigenous religions of cyberspace," as cyberspace functions as the locus of religious activity (Chidester 2005, 192). Therefore it is essential for this thesis to explore the parody religions' self-professed hubs on the Internet, as this is their primary medium for espousing their views and interests, along with engaging and attracting followers.

The corpus, or at least most of the primary material for analysis, is selected through Internet exploration. Websites and forums that are professed to be expressions of a certain parody religion are taken into consideration. This is also where complications come into play related to the Internet and authenticity. It is virtually impossible to verify if an entity on the Internet is who they claim to be, and whether materials and views are representative of the group we want to study. Especially with these virtual invented religions, authority is often not apparent, diffused, or deliberately vague. However, most of the parody religions discussed

here, including FSM, CoSG, and the United Church of Bacon, have a central website which functions as the focal point for religious information and activity. Even though in many cases authority is not clear or not even desired, the 'founders,' 'inventors,' or main caretakers are recognized. Often with these religions, followers are encouraged to engage with the core religious material and opportunities are present for them to contribute to and build on the mythology.

Besides these websites and Internet loci, sources include interviews with founders or literature written by founders, material created by followers, and actions by followers (think of lawsuits, media attention). Secondary sources that will be used include literature such as scholarly articles, books, and news articles. Here it is pertinent to critically evaluate these sources for reliability by checking peer reviews, citations, and keeping in mind the central argumentation of a piece.

Case studies

The corpus that will be analyzed mainly includes websites and literature of the CoSG and FSM, although other parody religions will be included as well. As the main subject of this thesis is parody religions, religions that fit the definition can be considered in order to test the hypothesis. The two main religions that comprise the corpus are the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and the Church of the SubGenius, as they are both parody religions but their interests and subjects of critique vary. These main cases are the bulk of the corpus, but others are used throughout for analysis.

The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) is perhaps the most successful parody religion: since its inception it has generated an enormous amount of engagement and recognition in popular culture. Also called Pastafarianism, FSM originated in 2005 after Bobby Henderson wrote a letter to the Kansas Board of Education after the latter allowed to teach Intelligent Design (ID) or Creationism in schools as an alternative theory to evolution theory (Chryssides 2012, 92). If the ID perspective could be taught on equal grounds, Henderson argued for a third perspective, namely that the world was created by a Flying Spaghetti Monster. FMS mythology is still in flux, but its main ideas are found on their website (https://www.spaghettimonster.org/) and in Henderson's *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* (2005).

The Church of the SubGenius (CoSG) was founded in 1979 by Philo Drummond and Ivan Stang, and is thought to have arisen in reaction to rampant consumerism and the political influence of conservative evangelicalism in the US (Chryssides 2012, 95). Its mythology

involves warped elements of Christianity, Scientology, popular mythology, conspiracy theories and works of fiction. Even though its founders claim the religion is unexplainable, many of their works attempt to do so. Their main ideas are consolidated in the SubGenius Manifesto (http://www.subgenius.com/slaq.htm#manifesto), SubGenius Pamphlet #1 (http://www.subgenius.com/pam1/pamphlet_p1.html), Subgenius Pamphlet #2 (http://www.subgenius.com/pams/pam2p1.html), and *The Book of the SubGenius*.

Academic discourse

Carole M. Cusack's *Invented Religions* can be considered the starting point for the current academic debate around invented religions.[1] She attempts to document this phenomenon using the term "invented religion" for those religions that refuse traditional strategies of legitimation and which teachings are both new and admitted to be the product of the human imagination, such as Discordianism, the Church of All Worlds, and the Church of the SubGenius (Cusack 2010, 1). She comes to the conclusion that, while these religions are invented and employ humor and irreverence, they are nonetheless meaningful to their members and are therefore real religions (Cusack 2010, 149).

In the same vein, Danielle Kirby, Cusack's PhD student, who uses Adam Possamai's term "hyper-real religions," argues that the academic dismissal of invented religions as sophisticated jokes has led to a disregard for the underlying philosophies of these religions, and that these religions are spiritual manifestations of a broader cultural shift towards irony and irreverence (Kirby 2012, 43). She analyzes Discordianism, the Church of the SubGenius, and the Temple of Psychick Youth as spiritual groups that heavily engage with popular culture. Both Kirby and Cusack regard these invented religions as "real religions," that use humor, irreverence and play as a means to transcendence. Accordingly, scholars have found that religions that originate as a parody religion can in time develop into a meaningful world-view for practitioners (Mäkela and Petsche 2013, 411). Others have argued that to parody religion implies that the parodist seriously cares about religion or what it is "supposed" to be (Robertson 2017, 209).

These arguments however, have also been challenged, most notably by Denis J. Bekkering (2016). He argues that the essentialist approaches by Cusack and Kirby neglect crucial relationships between invented religions and their targets of parody, dismissing their

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[1] The first scholar to address the existence of so-called "invented" or "fake" religions is David Chidester in his 2005 work *Authentic Fakes*. He highlights in a more broad context how these religions raise the problem of religious authenticity and who gets to negotiate these terms.

attempts to posit some invented religions as a meaningful religious system with a serious core (Bekkering 2016, 131). Bekkering claims here that joke/parody religions deploy satire to oppose and critique cultural and religious phenomena. For example, where Cusack views the CoSG's comical emphasis on "riches, luck and sexual attractiveness" as a "witty culture jam" on religions that emphasize material success, Bekkering sees this emphasis and CoSG's development in general in relation to specific evangelical phenomena of the time, in particular a strong evangelical political movement and the abundance of prominent television ministries. He sees the CoSG as a critical response to these phenomena, and satire as a tool used to oppose "powerful preachers' intertwining of religion and politics, to critique their sincerity and religious authenticity," and to relativize and delegitimize evangelical theology (Bekkering 2016, 132).

This matter of critique has also been noted by Joseph Laycock, who contends that these religions, in his case study the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and the Neo-American Church, are not simply created and perpetuated for amusement, but that they differ from traditional religions in that they attempt to interrogate the category of religion itself (Laycock 2013, 20). Laycock argues that the work of parody religions resembles that of the work of scholars of comparative religion. He follows Jonathan Z. Smith's notion of comparison as an active, at times playful enterprise of deconstruction and reconstruction in which useful comparison focuses on the differences between the compared objects instead of mostly on the "sameness" (Laycock 2013, 25). For Laycock, parody religions command comparison between objects by forcing the audience to examine the differences between the two, which is an effective approach to reassess culturally constructed frameworks.

Teemu Taira (2013) recognizes that studies on parody religions have focused on whether these religions are 'real' or not and argues that this question is irrelevant from an academic point of view. Taira rather focuses on power relations and practical interests, aiming to understand what it is that leads groups to pursue the label 'religion': what the social, material and economic consequences are of this undertaking. Laycock and Bekkering allude to these interests as well, as both acknowledge the existence of a wider social framework that encourages and enables parody religions to exist.

What is highlighted here is an important difference between these scholars in what they regard the role of humor to be within invented religions. For Cusack and Kirby, the incorporation of humor and elements of popular culture is seen as a new form of religiosity and meaning-making, whereas Bekkering and Laycock view this incorporation as an essential element aimed at satire and critique of religious and societal phenomena or the category of

religion itself. This thesis argues in accordance with the latter that these invented parody religions use satire and humor with a certain goal or interest that is not spirituality but critique. However, by focusing in the second part of the analysis on catchy concepts and engagement, it also recognizes the arguments by Cusack and Kirby that parody religions can function as hubs for community and belonging. In the first part of the analysis this thesis generally builds on the arguments posed by Bekkering and Laycock that parody religions can be effective instruments in critiquing and reconstructing culturally embedded frameworks. This thesis furthermore outlines the way in which parody religions fulfill this goal and how they could do this most optimally.

Even though invented religions as defined by Cusack focuses on origin and not on interest, it seems that it is exactly this point that divides scholars discussing the subject. If we put the focus on interest, many invented religions are not invented with the aim of sincere spirituality or religiosity, but rather with the aim of critique and satire. This is why this thesis proposes to discuss these religions as 'parody religions,' enclosing this interest in the term. It sees parody religions as religions that are invented and cultivated with the purpose of critique. The focus of this critique can extend to religious or cultural phenomena, the perception and treatment of religion in society, or the category of religion itself. Essential is that the humor and mimicry that is central to these parody religions serve the interest of critique. Their feigned similarity to their objects of critique serves, as Laycock calls it, the "command to compare": encouraging onlookers to interrogate their embedded assumptions about religion by evaluating how parody religions are different from religions they consider to be "real" (Laycock 2013, 20).

Structure

This thesis argues that successful parody religions both have a defined interest based on critique (1) and that they employ catchy concepts (2). The first chapter introduces the subject of parody and religion and structures the main argument by outlining why parody and perceived similarity to established religions is essential to the function of critique of parody religions. The second chapter establishes the theoretical and methodological base for the argument, adapting theories by Teemu Taira and Pascal Boyer into a framework for this thesis. The third chapter focuses on interest, exploring the way in which the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and other parody religions critique and how followers have employed these religions to attain their respective interests. The fourth chapter delves into the role of catchiness and memorability of concepts found in the Church of the SubGenius and

other parody religions. It employs an adapted version of MCI theory to analyze in what way concepts can be catchy and why people want to engage with them over a long period of time.

Chapter 1: Parody and religion

This chapter explores the relationship between parody and religion, how parody religions critique, and why it is necessary for parody religions to be perceived as authentic for achieving the goal of parody.

1.1 Parody and the creation of religion

Parody, in the modern use of the word, is a work of literary or visual communication that mimics and pokes fun at an existing, often well-known, original work and the subject matter of that work with the aim of satire or social criticism. One of its main purposes is to ridicule and challenge sacred verities and prevailing mores (Eko 2020, 161). Religions, in this sense, concern themselves primarily with sacred verities and mores, often claiming to be the root of morality and truth itself. Not only beliefs and rituals can be so embedded within cultures that they are taken for granted, also traditional religious institutions have often become so significantly ingrained in the fabric of societies that they appear untouchable, or beyond the reach of serious criticism. It is exactly these embedded moral assumptions that parody religions attempt to confront with their existence. Thus, parody religions are not created in a vacuum, but they emerge in relation to cultural phenomena and prevailing issues of power (Bekkering 2016, 144).

In the century following the Protestant Reformation, student of religion Jonathan Swift created one of the earliest progenitors of parody religion in his satirical work *A Tale of a Tub*, called "the Aeolists" (Laycock 2013, 20). The Aeolists are devoted to the deity of wind, its holy teachings are delivered not by words, but by "wind from the belly," meaning that they view the acts of belching and farting to be sacred, even "the noblest act of a rational creature" (Chidester 2005, 195). Their rituals revolve around inhaling the bodily gases of their priests, through which they seek to absorb their spiritual wisdom. Against the backdrop of the Enlightenment, Swift's account of the Aeolists contrasts prevalent ideas of a religious authenticity that requires transparency and (bodily) control (Chidester 2005, 195). Around the same time, a conception of religion steadily gained popularity in the Western world in which "religion" is seen as a *sui generis* category which could be universally identified across cultures (Laycock, 20). Religion became a seen as a self-evident category, a socially autonomous phenomenon which shares certain common characteristics (Smith 2017, 6). Thus, only through the creation of the criteria that religion is "expected" to possess, it becomes possible to manipulate these criteria through parody. In other words, creating religions that are

seen as "absurd" or "fake" is only possible if there are certain expectations in place that these religions can violate.

This gets to the heart of how parody works and why it is often inherently humorous: it raises an expectation for X and gives Y, or something that is 'not entirely X' (Rose 1993, 33). For example, where people would expect 'God,' a Flying Spaghetti Monster is inserted; where people would expect a sacrament, they instead find bodily gases. In this way, parody religions are funny because they insert the wrong word into an expected, familiar "grammar." This basic grammar consists of elements that one expects to find in religions, such as deities, creeds, rituals, and leaders (Laycock 2013, 20). Once again, the exercise of playing with this template is only feasible because this template of embedded expectations already exists within people's minds. However, the comic effect in play is not the result of a haphazard selection of elements: a thoughtful selection is most effective. This means that the parody chooses and manipulates elements of the object of parody to create a large contrast between expectations: replacing the serious with the absurd, the pious with the impious, and the sacred with the profane (Rose 1993, 33).

The parody religion is not only humorous because it violates certain expectations of what an "authentic" religion is supposed to look like, but this apparent absurdness also serves another goal by asking people why it is that they automatically perceive a Flying Spaghetti Monster as absurd and God not. If they perceive the grammar as correct, what constitutes a 'wrong word' and why? The parody religion opens up an arena for subversion in which these embedded moral expectations can be investigated and played with.

1.2 Parody religions: a powerful way to critique

What becomes clear is that the relationship between parody religions and their objects of parody is more complex than simple mockery or jests. The question remains why a parody religion is such a potent way to express critique: why would someone go through the trouble of creating an entire religion and amassing members instead of writing a critical essay or gain attention for a problem some other way? Let's begin by giving an example from the website of the parody religion The United Church of Bacon that ties in with the mechanism mentioned in the previous paragraph:

"We chose a funny bacon name to expose how wrong it is for society to give automatic respect and special legal privileges to religions. Is our saying we worship Bacon really any stranger than Catholics who say that communion wafers become the body of Christ? Unlike God, who is invisible, at least we can see Bacon. Bacon is demonstrably real."

This statement reveals what is at the core of the effectiveness of parody religions: it challenges the "automatic respect and special legal privileges" that are given to religions by forcing people to compare the United Church of Bacon with religions they consider to be authentic and ask of themselves exactly how they are different from each other.

This mechanism is what Joseph Laycock calls the "command to compare": the 'irreverent' nature of the parody religion demands comparison with established religions and forces people to evaluate the boundaries of what religion is (Laycock 2013, 20). Thus, the parody religion opens up a cognitive space to renegotiate the category 'religion' which other means can't provide with similar effectiveness. As discussed throughout this thesis, parody religions have certain interests, an agenda, which they strive to attain with their existence. That could merely be to interrogate the category of religion through subversion, but often they go a step further in demonstrating or exposing the consequences of this category on public policy, legal systems, or society in general. Discourses on religion in society are oftentimes marked by paradoxes and embedded moral assumptions that are not always apparent at the surface. Parody religions challenge these paradoxes which most take at face value by tirelessly picking at the "invisible seams of dominant discourses" (Martin 2010, 31).

Because these assumptions are so embedded, or invisible, they are often taken for granted. One way that parody religions can confront these assumptions and frameworks is through shock value: the apparent irreverence or absurdity of the concepts. The onlooker then has to define what it is that makes X 'real' religion, and Y 'fake' religion. The result is that it not only asks the question what makes Y *different* from X, but it also forces the onlooker to see how and in what ways X and Y are *similar*. Culturally constructed frameworks are designed to make the world make sense. When parody religions challenge these embedded frameworks in the way that they do, their efforts are often seen as immaturity or ridicule (Laycock 2013, 25). Furthermore, through demanding a place at the table with supposedly "real" religions in the public sphere, parody religions are unable to be ignored in the way that you could ignore critical essays or satirical fiction, thereby forcing the 'command to compare' on the public.

1.3 Perceived authenticity

There is one other factor in the parody religion's quest to fulfill their agenda effectively. I would argue that, for the desired command to compare to be optimally triggered, the parody religion itself should ideally claim to be a 'real religion.' The ostensible claim to be a genuine religious movement can be seen with many parody religions. This perceived authenticity

compels the command to compare by placing the burden of proof (that the parody religion *is* in fact not a 'real religion') on the public, even though it is often clearly implicit that this is the case. The burden of proof is not only placed on members of society, but it also extends to cases featuring parody religions which are brought before a court of law. As Chapter 3 will elaborate, legal institutions often have sincerity of belief or seriousness as one of its preconditions for what counts as religion. Parody religions challenge these traditional standards of authentication and legitimation, exposing the arbitrariness of common (conscious or unconscious) measures by which people and institutions judge the legitimacy of religions.

When new religious movements emerge, sometimes in hostile social environments, they often seek to justify their existence by proving their legitimacy. One form of this legitimacy is sought in the eyes of followers and potential converts, but the other form is concerned with how the movement is regarded by the larger society, both the public and the government. Working off of Max Weber's tripartite schema of legitimations of authority, James R. Lewis poses some strategies by which new religions legitimate their authority: (1) charismatic appeals, which includes appeals to direct divine revelation or superior spiritual insight of a leader; (2) rational appeals, which include an appeal to "common sense" or authority of science; and (3) traditional appeals, which include reinterpretation of tradition, authority of traditional religious figures, or ancient wisdom that antedates current religions (Lewis 2003, 13). Because of their agenda, parody religions are more concerned with establishing perceived authenticity than attracting genuinely believing followers. Thus, their use of legitimation strategies serves to establish a similarity with established religions.

One case which illustrates this mechanism is when Yahoo search engine classified Discordianism under the category "Parody Religions" in the early 2000s (Chidester 2005, 199). Upon finding out, Discordians launched an e-mail campaign to demand that Discordianism must be removed from "Parody Religion" and listed with the 'real religions' in the category "Religions and Faiths." One letter to Yahoo posited the problem: "I ask that either you move us into the same category as the rest of the religions, or tell me what the criteria [are] to become a 'real' religion so that I might show how Discordianism meets [them]" (Chidester 2005, 209). This raises profound questions as to what the criteria are for determining what should count as a 'real' or authentic religion. It is true that Discordianism has a self-professed fictional origin (Robertson 2012, 427), but there are many inspirational parallels with ancient religious texts that Discordians could use to legitimate their authenticity in the traditional or charismatic sense. The main deity in their scripture is Eris, the ancient Greek patron goddess of chaos, who is written to have appeared to the founders of

Discordianism (Cusack 2010, 28). As one Discordian pointed out, many other trickster deities have played an important role in the history or religions and cultures, "yet their religions aren't considered parodies" (Chidester 2005, 210).

By appealing to traditional legitimation strategies, parody religions establish perceived authenticity, thereby placing the burden of proof on others. Through this practice they challenge and critique the embedded frameworks by which people distinguish 'real' from 'fake' religion. The Yahoo Discordianism incident illustrates that this triggers the command to compare: it asks of society and the institutions that modulate religion what the criteria for 'real' religion are and what they are based on. This is only possible by mimicking basic forms of established religions, such as myth, doctrine, ethics, ritual, personal experience, and social formation (Chidester 2005, 210). In these ways, parody religions can establish the 'right' grammar so that they can insert the 'wrong' words, leading to powerful critique in a humorous fashion.

Chapter 2: Theory and methodology

For the first part of the analysis of the corpus this thesis draws from Teemu Taira's proposed framework for studying the category of invented religion (Taira 2013) and for the second part of the analysis this thesis adapts and builds on Pascal Boyer's theory (Boyer 2001) of minimal counterintuitiveness (MCI). In this section these relevant theories are presented, whereafter these theories are crafted into an analytical strategy for this thesis specifically.

The introduction of this thesis categorized parody religions with a focus on aim or interest. As Taira notes, Cusack's typology of invented religions chooses 'origin' or professed invented status as its main criterion, but her use of 'invention' is more complex than the name would suspect (Taira 2013, 479). Cusack uses it to denote a specific type of religions which both profess their invented status and which refuse traditional legitimation strategies (Cusack 2010), even though this typology does not explicitly say anything about the religions that fall into this category. Even though Scientology could be considered 'invented' and wary of traditional legitimation strategies, it does not fall within Cusack's category of invented religions. Therefore I would like to follow Taira's argument in shaping the category more around power relations and 'desire' or interests. Even though 'religion' could be deployed solely for achieving tactical goals, such as tax exemption, these interests are more broadly understood than conscious calculations in the sense that these uses are about authorizing, legitimating, reproducing and challenging collective identities (Taira 2013, 484).

The fourth chapter of this thesis looks into the 'catchiness' of the concepts of CoSG and other parody religions. The analysis in this part is based on Pascal Boyer's conception of minimal counterintuitiveness (MCI). Boyer proposes that promising religious concepts both (1) violate certain expectations from ontological categories while preserving other expectations and that they (2) preserve all the relevant default inferences except those that are explicitly blocked by the counterintuitive element. (Boyer 2007). The manner in which this theory could be employed has accrued some critique, predominantly with questions relating to the uniqueness of religious concepts (Purzycki & Willard 2016). This thesis however, opts for a more modest utility which solely analyzes MCI within concepts. Furthermore, it considers the research by Easker and Keniston (2019) in examining the difference in the cognitive optimum of both minimal counterintuitive and bizarre concepts to more clearly define the requirements of catchy concepts.

2.1 A framework for parody religions

I would argue that the reason that Scientology is not considered an 'invented religion' by Cusack but the Church of the SubGenius *is* relates to their reasons, or interests, for being invented in the first place. Parody religions, by their nature, have to have been 'invented' or consciously thought out. We understand the reasons for this creation to be different from other new religious movements such as, say, Scientology or Wicca, even though these could be considered 'consciously invented'. Vice versa, some religions considered 'invented religions' by Cusack's definition do not profess their invented status or their rejection of traditional legitimation strategies, instead claiming that their religion traces back hundreds of years, such as FSM and Discordianism, or that their mythology is based on prophecy, such as CoSG. In these cases, these religions *employ* traditional legitimation strategies or deny their invented status in order to serve their interests. This is why this thesis argues for an interest-based framework for these invented religions. The question then becomes less about origin but about *why* these religions are created and perpetuated. If not spiritual significance, what do creators and followers gain from engaging with parody religions?

Some would see parody religions as a derogatory term, using it in the same breath as 'joke religion' (Cusack 2013, Kirby 2012). Cusack argues that scholars use these terms to separate them from 'real religion,' thereby validating what they consider to be 'real religions' and rendering invented religions illicit because of their lack of supernatural origin (Cusack 2013). However, there had to be a reason why the term 'invented religion' was thought of in the first place to categorize some real phenomenon that apparently doesn't fit the scholarly mold of 'religion'. By recognizing this, and positing invented religions as a unique phenomenon, Cusack separates them from traditional religions as well. However, this does not automatically mean that parody religions are 'illicit,' or not valid. Indeed, parody religions hold such an uncomfortable academic position exactly because they challenge these "embedded moral assumptions" that scholars of religion have historically failed to confront (Laycock 2013, 20). The framework that this thesis uses identifies this aspect of parody religions and recognizes that they make use of what people think religion is in order to attain their interests. Their interest expresses a desire to challenge people's biases, and to force them to reassess these.

Teemu Taira's framework

The next chapter seeks to analyze FMS alongside other parody religions through the lens of Taira's framework. Taira (2013) argues that the focus of studies regarding parody religions

has been largely on whether certain examples can be considered 'real' religions, but that this question is irrelevant from a discursive point of view. He proposes an alternative framework which is centered around studying the practical interests and potential consequences of all instances where groups and activities are classified as 'religious' (Taira 2013, 477). Taira moves power relations to the centre of analysis, by asking what practical interests (social, material and economic) and consequences are promoted in the process of classifying something as religious (Taira 2013, 483). In this case, the aim is to determine the tactical uses of groups wanting to classify as religion and insisting others see them as religious. 'Interest' is not a conscious calculation in all cases, and viewing the obtainment of the label 'religious' solely as a desire for maximizing potential benefits discounts other 'typical' uses people associate with religion. However, for calculation-based interests to arise, the existence of a wider social formation is required in which certain conscious calculations become possible targets for advantageous undertakings. That is, there has to be a system present in which the label 'religion' comes with certain expected consequences.

As argued earlier in this thesis, parody religions often present an interest in being qualified as a religion. Sometimes this interest is clearly defined and recognizable, whereas other parody religions' interest may be more intangible and multifaceted. In most cases, the claim to be a religion serves some sort of interest that could not be fulfilled as fittingly without the label. Taira's toolkit involves four components: (i) interests; (ii) tactics; (iii) institutions (i.e. the legal system, the media, politics, healthcare, schools, prisons, workplaces, etc.) which both control and disseminate 'religion'; and (iv) actual and potential consequences of discourses on 'religion' (Taira 484). For this thesis, while the main focus will be on 'interests,' the other components will also be acknowledged. This means that, when analyzing FSM in the next chapter, we will be primarily concerned with the question why parody religions want to be deemed religious in the general or legal sense: what are their interests in this undertaking and how do they attain these interests?

2.2 MCI concepts and utility

Pascal Boyer's theory of minimal counterintuitiveness

Pascal Boyer, as a scholar within the cognitive science of religion, looks at how religious concepts are concocted in human minds. He argues that new concepts that people encounter are fitted into templates already present in human minds. These templates are abstract ontological categories such as 'living thing' or 'solid object' of which people have a set of information or assumptions and expectations they associate with the template. People use this

information they already possess with new input to draw conclusions, this is called inference. According to Boyer, salient and promising religious concepts follow two conditions:

(1) The first is that the religious concept violates certain expectations from ontological categories while preserving other expectations. The religious concept describes a new object within its ontological category but gives it special features that are not expected when invoking that template or category, this is what Boyer calls counterintuitive or, more accurately, counter ontological.

(2) The second condition is that religious concepts preserve all the relevant default inferences except the ones that are explicitly blocked by the counterintuitive element. This means that the concepts are built by using default expectations from the ontological categories other than the special feature(s).

Furthermore, he argues that concepts that are minimally counterintuitive (i.e. they are not too 'weird') are most optimal for believably embedding in the mind and surviving cultural transmission. Boyer also claims that the need to interact with supposed supernatural agents depends on their perceived access to strategic information: information that has consequences for the social mind and interaction systems (Boyer 2007).

An example of a concept that violates expectations is a ghost or a spirit: they can go through physical obstacles, thereby violating expectations about solid objects. Concepts of eternal gods or virgin birth, for example, violate embedded expectations about humans (humans are mortal/birth presupposes some form of copulation). On the other hand, these concepts preserve other relevant inferences: spirits and ghosts are represented as otherwise cognitively standard agents. 'Zombies,' as a concept of reanimated corpses, are cognitively nonstandard, but their bodies are expected to obey the same physical constraints as other solid objects (Boyer and Ramble 2001, 537).

Bizarreness and MCI

What differentiates MCI concepts from bizarre concepts is that MCI concepts violate core ontological categories that are mostly universally shared (Willard, Henrich and Norenzayan 2016, 223). These are expectations outside of the learned expectations, for example: living things are mortal, physical objects are solid, a person is visible. As argued above, a violation of these ontological categories in a concept means that the concept is more memorable and more likely to survive cultural transmission than concepts that are consistent with expectations or maximally counterintuitive. However, research has found that bizarre concepts can potentially be as cognitively optimal as minimally counterintuitive concepts, *if*

the audience is culturally homogenous (Easker & Keniston 2019, 302). Bizarre concepts are defined as concepts which violate "kind-level expectations" instead of core ontological expectations (Lisdorf 2004, 154). The example that was posed by Barrett and Nyhof (2001, 78) is as follows: a living thing weighing 5000 kilograms is unusual for, say, a dog, but weighing 5000 kilograms does not violate ontological expectations about living things in general. Following this distinction, an immortal lion is minimally counterintuitive (animals are mortal) but a pink lion is bizarre, because it violates expectations for lions in particular. Bizarre concepts then seem to be more dependent on culturally embedded expectations and prior knowledge of the audience than MCI concepts, which would be counterintuitive in most cultures (Lisdorf 2004, 154). The study done by Easker and Keniston (2019, 299) has found that -within a culturally homogenous group- bizarre concepts were recalled just as often as minimally counterintuitive concepts. We could say that bizarre concepts, while potentially as effective with regards to memorability as MCI concepts within a certain group, are less likely to be culturally transmissible than MCI concepts. However, both concepts are significantly catchier and memorable than non-MCI concepts or maximally counterintuitive concepts.

Utility

Critique of MCI theory largely relates to the range of questions it is suited to answer, specifically what makes religious concepts MCI and why people use MCI concepts (Purzycki & Willard 2016). This thesis follows Justin L. Barrett's proposed 'modest' utility, in which MCI theory is concerned with why some ideas are catchier than others (Barrett 2016). This 'catchiness' is based on how some concepts match human conceptual systems better than others, on characteristic ways of processing information that impact how ideas are remembered, communicated, and thus transmitted (Barrett 2016, 250).

The MCI effect that is used here is concerned with the generation and memorability of concepts. The presence of MCI concepts could explain why these ideas are able to catch on and persist. For this thesis this theory is adapted to go a bit further. MCI concepts violate certain ontological categories or templates, such as 'human' or 'animal,' of which virtually every human has certain expectations or inferences. However, I would argue that parody religions in turn tend to remix or mimic well-known religious concepts or folklore which makes their concepts both recognizable and catchy. In this case, categories exist that are prevalent within a certain group, culture or religion. This means that there are expectations that are not universal (as 'animal' or 'plant' would be) but rather specific to a group (such as 'yeti' or 'witch'), the kind-level expectations. If concepts are crafted from these culturally

bound categories, a concept could be cognitively optimal in one place but not in another. Furthermore, concepts that are already MCI in and of itself, like 'yeti' or 'witch,' can be used to craft bizarre, more culturally specific concepts that are recognizable for a specific audience. This suggests two important things:

1) First, even though some concepts are universally more cognitively optimal than others, some concepts will only be cognitively optimal for those people that are already familiar with the expectations that are violated in the first place. What I mean by that is that the concept of a completely bald Yeti is only bizarre for those people who already know the concept of Yeti and its cultural expectation that it is covered in hair or fur.

2) Second, MCI or bizarre concepts can further remix some culturally or religiously specific concepts in order to mimic these concepts or evoke an association with certain religious or cultural concepts without being explicit. This means that a concept of a prophet with an ordinary profession who is resurrected could invoke reference to the figure of Jesus Christ, but only to those who are familiar with this story.

This thesis uses this theory to analyze concepts of parody religions in order to assess the catchiness of these concepts and to evaluate their role in the parodying and mimicking of religious traditions by parody religions. This element is argued to contribute to the success of parody religions as presented in the introduction of this thesis.

Chapter 3: Interest

This chapter analyzes mainly the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster to explore and define its 'interest' building off of Teemu Taira's framework as clarified in the previous chapter. As argued previously, successful parody religions have an agenda, or 'interest,' as their *raison-d'être*. This interest, which contributes to both their success and their reason for being created in the first place, differs from most traditional religions in that it is centered around some form of subversive critique. This critique, broadly, is concerned with the practical interests and potential consequences that follow a group's classification as 'religion' in the eyes of society (Taira 2013, 484). It could be that the parody religion's interest is related to addressing certain benefits and privileges that established religions enjoy in society in a social, material, economic, or legal sense (i.e. tax exemption or privileges in prison), but interest could also be about much more abstract issues, such as critiquing religious beliefs and religious practice in general. The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is illustrative of both these interests, and this analysis aims to demonstrate that FSM has served as a vehicle for diverse interests throughout its existence, and that their existence and success is in large part based on this attainment of interest. This analysis is broadly modeled around parts of Taira's toolkit: (i) interests, (ii) tactics, (iii) institutions, and (iv) actual and potential consequences of discourses on 'religion' (Taira 2013, 484).

3.1 Interests

The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, often considered to be the most successful parody religion, originated in 2005 after physics graduate Bobby Henderson wrote a letter to the Kansas Board of Education after the latter allowed to teach Intelligent Design (ID) or Creationism in schools as an alternative theory to evolution theory (Chryssides 2012, 92). Advocates of ID argued that it is necessary that students should be taught "both sides of the debate," meaning that science classes should present ID alongside evolution teachings (Laycock 2013, 24). In his open letter, Henderson began by stating that he supports the school board's decision, affirming that it is important for students to hear multiple viewpoints, after which he expressed his concern that students will only hear one theory of ID. Henderson states that many people around the world believe that the universe was created by a Flying Spaghetti Monster, and requests that this alternative theory be taught in schools alongside the other two theories. The letter ends with a slightly snarky remark which informs the reader of Henderson's viewpoint:

I think we can all look forward to the time when these three theories are given equal time in our science classrooms across the country, and eventually the world; One third time for Intelligent Design, one third time for Flying Spaghetti Monsterism (Pastafarianism), and one third time for logical conjecture based on overwhelming observable evidence. (Henderson 2005).

Henderson's reason, or interest, in writing his letter and building a parody religion which would be recognizable around the world, is concerned with establishing and defending the boundaries between science and religious dogma (Laycock 2013, 24). However, due to what many saw as the irreverent and mocking nature of FSM, negative responses to Henderson's initiative were bound to happen. This is further illustrated by the fact that the FSM website has an entire section entitled "HateMail." Nonetheless, the official FSM website asserts that their religion is not a joke, and that obvious elements of satire do not undercut this statement, as satire is a legitimate basis for religion, according to them. "Satire relies on truth to be effective. If it's a joke, it's a joke where to understand the punch line you must be conscious of underlying truth" (spaghettimonster.org/about). The FSM website also clearly affirms that Pastafarians are not anti-religion and that it is "not an atheists club." Henderson himself has stated that he doesn't have a problem with religion itself, but that he has a problem with "religion posing as science" (Randi 2005). This last point is where Henderson's original intended interest (science =/= religious dogma) diverges from the interest that a significant portion of FSM followers has in mind by using FSM.

Henderson's aim with FSM was to use parody to draw attention to the difference between religious truth claims and scientific paradigms: by using absurdity he attempted to persuade the public to think about a controversial issue in a new way (Laycock 2013, 24). However, many followers saw in FSM a vehicle to attain a different interest: demonstrating that religion and all religious truth claims are inherently unprovable, and therefore absurd. These adherents, often aligned with the 'New Atheist' movement as propagated by writers such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens, see FSM as a version of 'Russell's Teapot,' named after its originator Bertrand Russell. Russell created a narrative about a china teapot that revolves around the sun to argue that it is the responsibility of the dogmatic individual to prove one's beliefs, rather than the responsibility of the skeptic to disprove them (Quillen 2017, 197). Unlike Henderson, New Atheist writers usually *do* have a problem with religion itself, viewing it as illogical and therefore not deserving of any meaningful place inside society (Randi 2005). New Atheist writer Richard Dawkins professed to be delighted that the *Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* had been published as a book,

using it as an example of Russell's teapot: "Russell's point is that the burden of proof rests with the believers [...]. Mine is the related point that the odds in favour of the teapot (spaghetti monster [...]) are not equal to the odds against" (Dawkins 2016, 76). The Church of the Invisible Pink Unicorn (CIPU) is an example of another parody religion which is centered around a deity that is often used as Russell's teapot. CIPU adherents insist that, because it can't be disproven that the Invisible Pink Unicorn does exists and is responsible for miracles, the religion should be taken as seriously as established traditions (Stuart Abel & Schaefer 2010, 7).

The objects of parody for the CoSG are very diverse, ranging from traditional or new religions to popular fiction sources, almost nothing is exempt (Kirby 2012, 49). Conceivably this also contributes to the longevity of success for CoSG, as in this way the potential audience who is able to receive and recognize their MCI concepts is optimized. CoSG mythology is casting their nets wide in order to maximize the chance of attraction while also fulfilling its interest in critiquing religion in many of its forms. With regards to this interest, the CoSG attempts to shake up people's normative patterns of thinking by presenting them with subversive and bizarre concepts. This absurdity is played up in order to provoke the onlooker to consider why they would perceive these concepts as obviously absurd, while not perceiving their objects of inspiration or parody through this same lens (command to compare). As with FSM, not all followers share exactly this interest by engaging with CoSG mythology.

These examples show that at heart of FSM is an interest, or an agenda, that explains its existence. The parody religion is used as a vehicle for critique, but it is evident that the object of this critique is not always clear-cut or shared equally between adherents: the original intended aim can evolve into something else as followers are accrued. The next paragraph examines how people have utilized FSM to attain their goals.

3.2 Tactics and institutions

The tactics that followers can employ to attain their interest(s) are often closely related to the institutions in society that control and disseminate 'religion.' As argued earlier, a movement's quest to be regarded as religious in the eyes of society has to do with the interests and hoped consequences that this label begets. Being recognized as religion, both by people and institutions, has real consequences and often leads to certain benefits or privileges that other groups are excluded from, such as tax exemption and other religious liberties. Institutions such as schools and governments make exceptions to accommodate these religious liberties

based on their criteria for what constitutes as religion. When a parody religion is employed in this area, interest is often concerned with opposing the significance and power of existing groups already deemed as 'religious' (Taira 2013, 484). With their parody religion, followers can follow these same legal pathways as established religions in an attempt to either (a) gain these liberties for themselves, (b) demonstrate that the criteria which are used to determine who deserves these liberties are flawed, (c) or argue that the existence of religious accommodations (or religion) in general is indefensible. These interests can of course be present simultaneously.

Founder Henderson's original goal was to use FSM to persuade schools, as an institution that modulates religion, to defend both their decision for teaching ID and evolution alongside each other and the criteria on the basis of which ID specifically was chosen as an equal contender for truth claims next to science. However, most cases of FSM being used to attain interests take place in courts of law. FSM has been used in many countries around the world to target legal institutions, initiating lawsuits and court cases to test laws relating to religion and religious exemptions for one of the three reasons mentioned above. The first of the three reasons, the interest to gain religious liberties for one's own gain, is arguably the most rare in the history of FSM lawsuits. Based on analysis of FSM court cases worldwide, most claimants ostensibly demand interest *a* in order to attain interest *b* or *c*. With the exception of one United States case in which a Nebraska prisoner appealed to Pastafarianism in a $5 million lawsuit along with seeking privileges in prison, avoiding punishment or hope for material gain have not been issues in FSM cases thus far (Martin 2020, 268).

Most of the cases are not concerned with an interest of personal material gain, but with fulfilling some form of critique. Such was the case with one of the first legal victories using FSM, a case which has since become associated with the parody religion in the public eye. In 2011, Austrian Nico Alm fought for the right to wear a colander on his head in official photographs, in this case his driver's license. Normally, headgear is not allowed on official documents, but an exception is made for religious clothing. According to Alm, he should be able to wear the FSM religious headgear in the same way that nuns and Muslim women could wear their head garb on official document photo's (Alm 2011). Alm, a self-professed atheist, admitted that his actions stemmed from a desire to speak out against religious privileges, using the FSM in a utilitarian sense to argue for a clear separation of church and state in Austria and against government-issued subsidies for religion (Alm 2011). Alm's case inspired dozens of other people around the world to attempt the same feat, with varying levels of success. Since 2011, the colander is recognized as religious headgear in the Czech Republic,

New Zealand, and the U.S. states of Massachusetts and Utah, among others (Bauer 2018). Success or not, none of the cases have led to the church being officially recognized as religion, though not for lack of trying.

Another parody religion that employs legal means for the interest of critique is the United Church of Bacon. The Church wishes to challenge the legal bias and financial privileges in favor of religions in the US, in particular the fact that churches do not have to pay taxes; are not legally required to publish reports on income and expenditures; and that the 80 billion US dollars provided to religious organizations each year should be taxed to improve the country (https://unitedchurchofbacon.org/our-beliefs/). By asking for legal privileges for their church and their Bacon God, they seek to demonstrate that every religion has strange beliefs and that religion is not a good reason for bias in the law.

3.3 Consequences of discourses on religion

When there are real consequences present in becoming recognized as 'religion,' institutions that control these consequences should have clear definitions and criteria for determining which movements are deserving of the label. It is exactly because of these consequences that courts should be able to say exactly what religion is (Eisgruber & Lawrence 2009, 808). In order to judge objectively, without getting into specific theological questions, institutions that modulate religion must endorse some, albeit imperfect, definition of religion. For instance, to protect religious freedom, courts have to be able to recognize which activities they are trying to protect. However, having picked these criteria (which are often based on discourses pertaining to traditional religions in which belief and solemnity are central), institutions have ran into difficulties when they are confronted with cases which test these criteria. I would argue that the interest of critique here is aimed at the one criterion that has been used to deny the FSM the status of religion in many countries: seriousness.

One such case in the Netherlands used FSM to target the highest legal institutions in the country and in Europe. I contend that this case was meant to fulfill interest *b* mostly: the claimant in question used FSM to challenge and address how the law *defines* 'religion.' In this case from 2018 (201707148/1), a Dutch woman appealed to the Dutch Council of State that Pastafarianism should be regarded as a religion within the meaning of Article 9 European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and Article 6 of the Dutch Constitution. Her first appeal to wear a colander on her passport photo was denied, because a municipal court held that she had not demonstrated that Pastafarianism required its followers to cover their heads (foregoing the question whether FSM is a religion or not). The Dutch Council of State

considered the preconditions formulated in the case law of the ECHR which requires religion to "attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance" (Article 9, European Convention on Human Rights). The Dutch Council ruled that the satirical element in Pastafarianism is so dominant that the preconditions of Article 9 are not met. In particular, there is "a lack of the required seriousness and cohesion." This precondition of seriousness is often cited to be the most problematic for FSM followers, and is regularly critiqued as an illustration of the biases present in these rulings (Henderson 2021). The criterion is similar to the U.S. "seriousness test" (does the adherent genuinely hold the beliefs?) and "sincerity test" for determining religious exemptions, which examines coherency between what is said and what is done by the claimant (Martin 2020, 266).

The point of critique from FSM followers and followers of other similar parody religions relates to the question *how* the judge is able to objectively confirm whether the claimant truly believes their religious beliefs and *why* this confirmation is a necessary precondition in the first place. It is public knowledge that Pastafarianism begun as satire and that many of its adherents concede its parodic intent, but many Pastafarians explicitly deny the satirical origin and hold that their beliefs are genuine (Martin 2020, 265). The interest of critique here for which FSM is used is that the criteria with which institutions judge which intents and beliefs are "genuine" and "coherent" are problematic and inconsistent. In this sense, this case and similar cases force the command to compare on the institutions that modulate religion.

Chapter 4: Catchiness

The previous chapter analyzed the 'interest' of FSM without examining their mythology or present core concepts. This chapter is concerned with the form of the Church of the SubGenius and other parody religions: using an adapted version of MCI theory and by including bizarre concepts, it explores these concepts within their constructed mythology to gauge how catchy they are and why people want to engage with them over a long period of time. As argued in Chapter 2, some ideas are catchier than others because they are able to match human conceptual systems better than others. These concepts correspond optimally to characteristic ways of processing information, which impacts how ideas are remembered, communicated, and transmitted (Barrett 2016, 250). When there are MCI or bizarre concepts present within the mythology of a parody religion, it could explain why these concepts are able to catch on and generate engagement from people who come into contact with them. Furthermore, I have proposed that MCI and bizarre concepts are able invoke reference *to* specific groups or religious concepts *for* specific groups or cultures. In this way, a concept could target and attract a specific type of audience while also accomplishing the intention of parody. I argue then that catchy concepts within a parody religion serve two purposes: mimicking (establishing similarity) and generating memorability and engagement ('catchiness'). This chapter aims to demonstrate that by analyzing some of the concepts and deities within CoSG and other parody religions.

4.1 Catchiness and mimicking within concepts

MCI and bizarre concepts can support the establishing of similarity between a concept and the object of its parody. This is because the level to which a concept is bizarre is dependent on the previous knowledge the audience of the concept possesses, or their expectations. In order for these expectations to be violated, they first need to be present within the mind of the onlooker. These expectations are often specific to a certain culture or group of people, thereby making the concept more cognitively optimal to a specific audience. Concepts can then invoke reference and similarity to a well-known concept belonging to a specific culture or religion, thereby contributing to the function of parody. Therefore also, the ease with which cultural transmission of a certain concept can take place hinges on the presence of the template in different cultures. The concept of a ghost is easily transmissible between cultures because the template it shares with other concepts of the same type is ontological and therefore found in virtually all cultures (Boyer and Ramble 2001, 538).

Besides this function, MCI and bizarre concepts, because of their catchiness, are able generate engagement and memorability. Some of the most popular, most engaged with concepts in CoSG mythology can be found within the SubGenius Pamphlets #1 and #2 and the SubGenius Manifesto, all present on the SubGenius website (subgenius.com). Even more than 40 years after its inception CoSG manages to engage its followers, as illustrated by two new forums (ScrubGenius and DOBBS.TOWN), a recent documentary movie (youtu.be/jJdJEEZvhsA) and the publishing of the first SubGenius science fiction novel, *Eyelash*, on Januari 2021. There is a new SubGenius online TV channel available on streaming websites ROKU and Vimeo (osi74.com/index.php/church-of-the-subgenius/) and the radio program "Hour of Slack" is broadcast and streamed every week. On Etsy, a popular e-commerce company for buying and selling homemade items, a host of new CoSG-themed paraphernalia can be bought, such as "Bob" Dobbs clothing patches, "Slack"-mugs and t-shirts, and SubGenius bumper stickers (etsy.com/market/subgenius). Even the COVID-19 pandemic was capitalized on, with the official SubGenius webshop advertising "Bob" shirts as facemasks in which the lower half of the wearer's face seems to be "Bob" smoking his signature pipe (subgenius.com/scatalog/tshirts.htm). Among the plethora of CoSG concepts, the concepts that have been able to captivate followers even to this day seem to be J.R. "Bob" Dobbs and his likeness, the alien race of Xists, and the deity Jehovah-1.

4.2 Concept analysis

This paragraph analyzes the minimal counterintuitiveness or bizarreness of concepts and deities of various parody religions to explore their catchiness and potentially determine their object of parody. As clarified earlier, MCI concepts violate expectations of core ontological categories which are present universally, while bizarre concepts violate 'kind-level expectations' which require some knowledge or familiarity which may be more specific to a certain culture or group.

The following general ontological categories are identified for the purpose of analysis: Spatial Entities, Solid Objects, Living Things, Animates, and Persons (Barrett 2008, 317). Spatial Entities include entities with specifiable locations and often identifiable boundaries which are not solid (e.g. clouds and shadows); Solid Objects denote artifacts (e.g. tables, shoes, pens) and natural non-living objects (e.g. mountains, stones); Living Things are those biologically living things which do not move autonomously (e.g. trees, plants, mushrooms); Animates include animals that appear to propel themselves (e.g. fish, tigers, mosquitoes); Persons are (human) beings who posses autonomous, conscious minds. These are all

categories which universally invoke similar expectations. If a concept violates expectations of these categories, we call it minimally counterintuitive. However, if kind-level expectations are violated, we call that concept bizarre instead. For example, a walking tree would be MCI because it violates the ontological Living Things category, but a 200 meter tall tree would be bizarre because it only violates kind-level expectations. What is important to note for this analysis is however that both MCI and bizarre concepts are more cognitively optimal than those concepts which are neither, such as intuitive and maximally counterintuitive concepts. For the argument of this thesis it is furthermore not necessary to demonstrate that all concepts within a parody religion have to be MCI or bizarre. Below is a table which analyzes concepts of parody religions for their MCI- or bizarreness by examining which expectations are violated for each. After the table the concepts are introduced and discussed.

Concept/Violation	Spatial Entity	Solid Objects	Living Things	Animates	Persons	Kind-level	Type of concept
J.R. "Bob" Dobbs					Supernatural abilities		MCI
Jehovah-1						Alien; Radioactive; Cloud	None, Maximally CI
Flying Spaghetti Monster		Godlike abilities; Invisible					None, Maximally CI
Invisible Pink Unicorn				Invisible		Horn; Color	MCI; Bizarre
The Spoon of Justice		Sense of smell					MCI
SubGenius						Descended from Yeti's	Bizarre
Xists					Survival in outer space	Alien	MCI; Bizarre

Table 1: Overview of concept analysis (violations)

J.R. "BOB" DOBBS

J.R. "Bob" Dobbs is the so-called "High Epopt over all SubGenii," a living deity who is depicted as an archetypal 1950s American salesman who perpetually smokes a pipe. "Bob" reportedly discovered the existence of a god named Jehovah-1 and a notion known as "The Conspiracy" while watching television. It was thus revealed to him that Jehovah-1 had been denying the SubGenii of the ineffable quality called "Slack" for centuries. "Bob" is the archetype SubGenius and the personal savior of the SubGenius race, and is furthermore the living incarnation of "Slack" on earth. The SubGenii are a different race than normal humans, who are called "Pinks" or "Normals," and are said to be descendants from Yeti's who,

according to CoSG lore, lived in the underwater city of Atlantis. "Bob" is a salesman, perfectly embodying the imperfections of the human condition and all the while fighting against "normality." "Bob" reportedly has the ability to teach SubGenii time control, transfiguration, and communication with the alien race of Xists. "Bob" reportedly has been shot and killed in 1984 by the Conspiracy, but could return at any moment on a day of reckoning (Pamphlet #1 and #2).

"Bob" shares many characteristics with an ordinary human: he looks human, he has a steady sales job, he watches television, he has a wife named Connie, yet he is also a SubGenius who was able to receive a message from Jehovah-1 and possesses many talents that are not found in the ordinary man. "Bob" is not all-knowing, all-powerful, or immortal, but is still regarded as a deity. "Bob" is likened to the figure of Jesus Christ in the CoSG scripture in many ways: his "ordinary" profession, his reception of Jehovah-1's message, his status as a personal savior, his predicted return to earth, and his superhuman abilities. "Bob" is attention-grabbing exactly because he looks and functions like a human being, but he is at the same time a catalyst for salvation for all SubGenii.

When we examine his concept with regards to MCI theory, we could say that, besides his prophet-like status, expectations of the ontological category of Persons are violated with regards to his supernatural abilities such as time travel and transfiguration. These violations confuse but also speak to the imagination: it captivates people who come into contact with his story. Because the concept of "Bob" is so versatile, he can become a template which can be endlessly adapted and engaged with to create more narratives, while still making sense within the CoSG mythology.

JEHOVAH-1

Jehovah-1, also called JHVH-1 or Yahweh, is the central deity, or "space god," within the SubGenius scripture. He is in essence a vengeful "God of Wrath," portrayed as a mad alien who is covered in eyes. He comes in the clouds, is radioactive, and pervades everything on a subatomic level. Jehovah-1 is said to have changed humans in their primeval days by imposing "brakes" on them which keep humans "normal" and suppresses their urge to commit acts that appear in their fantasies. Through the Conspiracy (which is an abbreviation of Cliques of Normals Secretly Planning Insidious Rituals Aimed At Controlling You) he denies SubGenii of Slack and keeps them in the dark about their sovereignty.

What seems to be the object of mimicry for the Jehovah-1 concept? Jehovah-1 seems to be inspired by the Abrahamic God of the Old Testament, as he is named Yahweh, he has

created humans and all life on earth, and is referred to with a capital letter in writing. The CoSG scripture also mentions Jesus Christ, albeit as a 'space detective' of the alien race of Xists, who walked the earth in human form with the goal of saving humans from the grip of Jehovah-1. It is even purported that Jesus Christ preached Slack, but that all references to this have been destroyed (Faq on Slack). Pamphlet #1 occasionally uses quotes from the Bible, in particular from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, to illustrate and warn against the existence of a whole list of false prophets. According to SubGenius lore, all the miracles of the Old Testament are inextricably connected with the invisible war between Jehovah-1 and the Xists. Jehovah-1, despite being extremely powerful, is not all-knowing or all-powerful, as the Xists are able to resist Jehovah-1's presence.

The case of Jehovah-1 is a complicated one. God is not an identified ontological concept, yet the case could be made for many kind-level violations if one considers the Abrahamic God to be of the same kind. The concept of the latter also violates many ontological categories of Persons, making the Abrahamic God theoretically maximally counterintuitive. Yet, because so many people are familiar with the concept of a god such as the one in Abrahamic religions, kind-level violations could be argued to apply. Even still, Jehovah-1 has far too many unexpected attributes to be considered either MCI or bizarre.

FLYING SPAGHETTI MONSTER

The Flying Spaghetti Monster is the main deity within the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. He resembles a lump of spaghetti, including two meatballs and long "Noodly Appendages." The Flying Spaghetti Monster has one set of eyes and is able to fly, yet is also invisible to the human eye (Henderson 2005, 4). According to the Gospel written by Bobby Henderson, the deity is not only responsible for the creation of man (in his ideal image), but also for the existence of the appearance of gravity. It is said that humans are kept down to the earth by His Noodly Appendages, which explains why humans have gotten taller over the course of history, as there are fewer appendages to go around to touch each human (Henderson 2005, 5). Humans are claimed to be descended from Pirates, who are the Chosen People for Pastafarians and their deity. The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster even proposes that natural disasters such as global warming, earthquakes, and hurricanes are a direct result of the shrinking number of Pirates (Henderson 2005, 26).

It would seem that FSM belongs to the Solid Objects category, as its appearance suggests it to be a lump of spaghetti. However, it also possesses qualities usually ascribed to beings in the Persons category, as it is portrayed as a conscious, self-propelling deity who is

referred to as "He." FSM then violates multiple expectations in both categories, possessing functional eyes, being invisible, having godlike abilities and having created the known universe and everything in it. For this analysis then, FSM would be almost maximally counterintuitive rather than MCI or bizarre.

INVISIBLE PINK UNICORN

The Invisible Pink Unicorn is revered within the Church of the Invisible Pink Unicorn, a parody religion which primarily uses their deity as a version of Russell's Teapot. As the name implies, the unicorn is both pink and invisible, and is said to be the cause of miraculous events, such as the disappearance of socks in laundromats (Stuart Abel & Schaefer 2010, 2).

The concept of a unicorn in itself could be said to be a kind-level violation, as it is usually portrayed as having the shape of a regular horse, albeit with a horn and often a bright color. Horns are not unusual in nature and do not violate ontological categories. It is therefore not MCI to propose a horse with such attributes, although it is bizarre for those who are not familiar with the concept. In a cultural setting where someone knows of the concept of a unicorn, the case could be made that the Invisible Pink Unicorn is MCI. IPU takes the concept of a unicorn as a creature from legend and violates certain ontological expectations by posing her as invisible. The color pink could potentially be a kind-level violation, but this portrayal in contemporary usage is not unheard of. However, Animates, the ontological category a horse or unicorn would belong to, are not invisible, making the concept MCI.

SPOON OF JUSTICE

The Spoon of Justice is an object featured in a splinter group of the FSM, called the Moomon Church of His Spaghettiness. The Moomons, as their adherents are called, reject Henderson's claim that Pirates are the Chosen People of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, instead asserting that the Moomons are his preferred people. Because Pirates are seen as a fraud, Moomons dress in pink fluffy togas. The Spoon of Justice is said to be an artifact left over from the Moomon-Christian wars that allegedly took place in the early 1400's. On one of the Moomon celebratory days, Bree Day, it is compulsory for members to assassinate at least one heretic member of the other churches of the FSM with a spoon in a secret ritual manner. The Spoon of Justice artifact is said to appear as a regular spoon, as it can be used for eating, save for its ability to sniff out heretics due to its exceptional sense of smell (Moomon Church of His Spaghettiness Website).

The Spoon of Justice violates an expectation of the ontological category Solid Objects. Solid Objects are not expected to possess qualities associated with Animates and Persons, such as a conscious sense of smell. Not only does the spoon possess sense of smell, it also is able to smell a particular quality in humans, namely that they are heretics. This added power could also be considered MCI if ascribed to a Person, as sense of smell does not include qualities or dispositions, which excrete no scent.

XISTS

The Xists are an alien race living on Planet X, who are considered to be the mentors of the SubGenii. The Xists are one of the few beings who have the ability to temporarily resist the permeation of Jehovah-1, with whom they are involved in a cosmic battle. The SubGenii are the weapons with which Jehovah-1 and the Xists fight their constant struggle, but the Xists themselves are also merely used by higher beings, or Elder Gods, in the cosmos. The Xists are said to have walked on the earth throughout history and have built Atlantis, the pyramids and other monuments. Small clues of this invisible background war can be found in "Ancient Astronaut"-fossils found on earth (SubGenius Manifesto). According to CoSG lore, Jesus Christ was a "space detective" of the Xists, walking the earth in human form on a mission to pull the SubGenii away from Jehovah-1's grip.

The Xists-concept really illustrates that CoSG' objects of parody are wide-ranging. The Xists invoke references to a conspiracy often called the "Ancient Astronaut" conspiracy, which claims there have been ancient aliens who visited earth and influenced human culture and development (Palmer and Sentes 2012, 168). The alien race also resembles the aliens mentioned in new religious movement Scientology's account of history, in which the past galactic dictator Xenu, ruler of the "Galactic Confederacy," was reportedly engaged in a space war. Scientology also follows these themes of human beings that have forgotten their divine origin, which they are able to reawaken through the cosmically significant practice of Dianetics (Trompf 2012, 69). Both with CoSG and Scientology, a premise is created that, even though followers may seem like entirely normal human beings, they actually have a remarkable origin that most of the world does not seem to know about, whether it being Yetis or aliens. This is combined against a backdrop of a magnificent cosmic warfare between mighty beings with their own, often obscure, agenda.

When examining the Xists as a concept, a few things stand out. It is not clearly described what Xists look like in SubGenius literature, but it can be assumed that they do not look like humans as one of them (Jesus Christ) was said to take human form while on earth,

implying that their original form does not look like a regular human. They have however been described as "Men from Planet X" (Canobite 1998). Contrary to humans, Xists are able to resist Jehovah-1 and live in outer space, which does seem like a kind-level violation. However, if Xists fall into the Persons ontological category as self-propelling conscious beings, the notion that they are able to breathe in outer space would suggest an ontological violation, which would make the concept MCI.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to discover what parody religions are and why they are created. It has attempted to explain the appeal and successfulness of parody religions by arguing that successful parody religions both have a defined interest based on critique (1) and that they employ catchy concepts (2). Academic research has hitherto not focused enough on why it is necessary for parody religions to look like established religions and the ways in which they establish this similarity. Understanding the relevance, existence, and success of parody religions is beneficial because it will lead to a broader understanding of both the creation and legitimation of religion and the disciplinary concerns present within the study of religion. Through an adaptation of a proposed framework for invented religions by Teemu Taira and Pascal Boyer's theory of minimal counterintuitiveness the two proposed elements of successful parody religions were explored within mainly two case studies: the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and the Church of the SubGenius, while other parody religions have been discussed to support the analysis throughout. These parody religions were chosen as main objects of analysis because they have been undeniably successful since their inception, both in their ability to attract and engage followers as well as their cultural significance with regards to attaining their interest.

This thesis has demonstrated that what makes parody religions such as CoSG and FSM so effective is their ability to open up a cognitive space in which the category of religion can be renegotiated, thus serving an interest of critique. This is stimulated by the presence of catchy concepts and mythology, which manages to attract and engage followers for a long time while also establishing similarity with their object(s) of parody.

(1) Interest of critique

First of all, parody religions mimic and adapt elements of their object of parody in order to critique by means of 'command to compare.' The existence of the parody religion provokes a certain response from the onlooker, who, encumbered by embedded moral assumptions, seeks to place the parody religion within a certain category in their mind. Here, their expectations of what "religion" is most likely not do not correspond with the parody religion they're confronted with. Some elements of the parody religion do meet certain expectations, or, the right "grammar" that many traditionally associate with religion: deities, rituals, sacred beliefs, creation stories, etcetera. But within this familiar grammar, the parody religion inserts the wrong words: instead of "God," a "Flying Spaghetti Monster" or "Bacon" is worshipped, a religious headscarf is substituted with a colander, the traditionally sacred is replaced with the

profane. This mechanism contributes to the comicality of the parody religion, but it also forces the onlooker to contemplate exactly what they consider to be "real religion." It obligates them to compare the parody religion to their idea of a legitimate religion: how are the two different? And perhaps more provocative: how are they the same? Parody religions serve the subversive purpose of shocking people out of their deep-rooted patterns of thinking in order to promote their interest.

This brings us to the point of critique. Both expectations of what religion means and religious beliefs and institutions have become so ingrained in societies that people often take them for granted, feeling that they are inherently beyond critique. In a way, these subjects are regarded as sacrosanct. This thesis has argued that parody religions serve a certain agenda that is in some way related to the interest of critique. Teemu Taira's framework for invented religions invites us to ask what practical interests (social, material and economic) and consequences are promoted in the process of classifying something as religious. While there is no universally agreed upon definition of religion, institutions that modulate religion still have to have some measure by which to judge what is and what isn't religion. These systems are largely influenced by expectations of traditional, established religions, even though the religious landscape in many countries is getting more and more diverse.

Chapter 3 has shown that, by their attempts to be regarded as a religion in the eyes of the law, FSM has served broadly two different interests: demonstrate that the criteria which are used to determine who and what situations deserve religious accommodations are flawed, and/or demonstrate that the existence of religious accommodations or religion in general is indefensible. The former interest is illustrated by founder Bobby Henderson's intention to argue that religious dogma should not be treated in the same way as science in schools. The latter interest is demonstrated by a portion of the followers, often aligned with the New Atheist movement, who use FSM as a version of "Russell's Teapot" to argue that it is the responsibility of the dogmatic individual to prove one's beliefs, rather than the responsibility of the skeptic to disprove them. It has become clear in chapter 3 that, while followers of a parody religion share the interest of critique, what is critiqued by engaging with it can differ between followers.

(2) Catchiness

Secondly, a successful parody religion employs catchy and humorous concepts. As chapter 4 has shown, incorporating these catchy concepts serves two purposes for a parody religion: mimicking (establishing similarity with the object of parody) and generating memorability,

engagement, and a sense of community between followers. This thesis has combined and adapted Pascal Boyer's theory of minimal counterintuitiveness (MCI) and included bizarre concepts to argue why some concepts are catchier than others. MCI concepts largely preserve the expectations that accompany an ontological template while violating certain others. In this way, concepts are able to correspond optimally to the characteristic ways in which humans process information. This has consequences for the memorability, communication, and transmission of ideas.

For the first purpose, I have proposed that these MCI and bizarre concepts can be tailored in such a way that they can effectively target a specific audience which possesses specific expectations, either ontological or kind-level expectations. These expectations can then be played with to establish a concept which invokes reference to a well-known concept, making the created concept instantly recognizable without having to be explicit. Achieving this level of similarity with the intended object(s) of parody promotes transmission of these ideas by attracting the people who are familiar with these intended objects. This similarity then also contributes to the interest of critique by provoking the command to compare.

MCI and bizarre concepts aid the second purpose, generating engagement, because they are able to optimally match human conceptual systems, or at least more optimally than their non-MCI or non-bizarre counterparts, thereby stimulating their memorability and transmission. They are also humorous in a "wrong word right grammar" sense, giving the concepts a bizarre and absurd twist. The violations and contradictions that the concepts present intrigues people and grabs their attention upon coming into contact with them. As highlighted in chapter 4, many of the concepts provide a versatile and easily adaptable canvas for followers to work with, while still "making sense" within the mythology. This stimulates and enables people to engage and play with the concepts for decades, while also creating a sense of shared community and worldview between adherents.

Parody religions are a fascinating byproduct of the creation of the category of religion throughout the world. Even though no one can agree on what "religion" is, everyone nonetheless has a distinct conception of it in their minds, accompanied by conscious or unconscious expectations. Parody religions are met with confusion when demanding a place within society, popular culture, and academic discourse. They wish to provoke a response from the people and institutions responsible for modulating this place. What is it that makes me (not) like them? By taking up this space, and by doing it with recognizable and humorous concepts that speak to the imagination and encourage engagement, parody religions can bring

their interest of critique about in the most effective and disruptive manner (while also having fun along the way).

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