

Cults on the Internet

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The expanding ease of making use of the internet to produce home pages has brought new religions and cults to the world's attention. The internet also allows people to satirize and parody religious cults as well. One such religious parody is the Church of the SubGenius. The internet has given this cult much more publicity than it could ever get through the normal print and broadcasting media.

The Church of SubGenius was introduced to the general public through a book entitled *The Book of the SubGenius*, which was first published by McGraw-Hill in 1983. The book is purported to be written by one J.R. Bob Dobbs and calls for people to avoid the world-wide conspiracy of normals to keep individuals from attaining their full potential, encapsulated in the concept of "slack." The first chapter of the book sets out its purpose:

This epipastic for the brains of Eoptics, Beholders, and Initiates, works an authentic magician's spell that will drive OUT the foreign person-alities and id-demons. Protected by its own occult roots in the most extreme forms of para-and mech-psychology, it places the reader within a "shell" of Weird Phenomena which Must be used for good And evil. Its system of

Mystik Correspondences has already given SECRET POWER to the Church of the SubGenius-the world's first Industrial Church, the prophesied End Times cult of screamers and laughers, scoffers, blasphemers, mockers, sinners, and the last true holymen in America today. KEEP THIS BOOK NEAR YOU-in your pocket, your bathroom, your glove compartment. Study it. Memorize it. Find within its pages a NEW DIRECTION a NEW WAY-a HIGHER yet LOWER REALITY-just as thousands before you have done! 'Do What Keepeth Thou from Wilting, Shall be The Loophole in the Law' The Church Of The SubGenius is an order of Scoffers and Blasphemers, dedicated to Total Slack, delving into Mockery Science, Sadofuturistics, Mega-physics, Scatalography, Schizophreniatrics, Morealism, Sarcastrophy, Cynisacreligion, Apocolyptionomy, ESPectorationalism, HypnoPediatics, Subliminalism, Satyriology, DistoUtopianity, Sardonicology, Fasciestiouism, Ridiculophagy, and Miscellaneous Theology. 1

The book parodies the motivational and business self-help books which have been so popular in recent years and also parodies the Bible and other holy books of other religions and cults. As the following passage from The Prescriptures demonstrates, science fiction and horror stories are also parodied, specifically H. P. Lovecraft's fictional cult religious document, the Necronomicon:

PROPHECY OF THE SUBGENIUS

from The Economicon of Dobbs

Neumeronicus Neuronicus 56-88

Bank 18 Disc sg30 File 14

- 1 Behold, little pink earth brain
within my void-grip, and receive Logos;
and lay with the Word;
- 2 Ung! Ung! Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin! LO!
- 3 I am Jehovah One, the God of Wrath, that
One who, to make Man pull the triggers of
his thousand opposable thumbs, caused the
apes of the ground to spill their seed on the
dust.
- 4 I am the first and the last, which is to come,
and which is, and which was; I am in the
brain-pan of every human babe.
- 5 Of left and of right, the outer and the inside:
the Particle; the Totality: for the Gavel of the
Grid is mine own, and I spat the silly for-
mula of Man upon the waters and fashioned
his spirit after the image of mine own, for
Jehovah is a vengeful god, and I urinate on
the heads of Men. 2

The Church of the SubGenius was created by Ivan Stang, a Texas film editor and Philo Drummond, a rock musician. In an interview with Netta Gilboa for Gray Areas, an on-line magazine which is only published on the internet, Stang admits that, although some people apparently take it seriously, the church is a satire on religion:

PreScripture says the Church began in 1953 when J.R.

"Bob" Dobbs, while experimenting with a home-made TV set and standing in a puddle of water, was EMACULATED by JHVH-1, the alien Space God from some corporate Sin Galaxy, and conceived this Church. Others say it really began the first time two rascally kids "cut up" in church, when they were supposed to be acting pious. Real heretics say it started when my partner, Dr. Philo Drummond, discovered that I, too, collected kook literature, and we pooled our resources to create, for mercenary purposes only, the final synthesis of all end-times prophecy, from all crazed religious nuts, true visionaries, science fiction writers and bad monster movies. 3

In fact, Stang and Drummond started by printing small pamphlets and leaving them in coin laundries and other public places. People then began writing to Stang with enclosed checks for subscriptions. Stang and Drummond expanded their newsletter into a yearly magazine they entitled *The Stark Fist of Removal*. Some of the material was picked up by underground cartoonists like R. Crumb, who included references to the church in their cartoons. In 1981, Stang and Drummond put together their first audiotape cassettes of assorted bits of records and spoken word commentary, which they sold through mail-order. Written instructions came with the tapes to parody cults and their apocalyptic warnings. A few points give the general attitude:

If you follow these instructions and trust completely in "Bob," however, you are in for hours, days, weeks, and very possibly CENTURIES of listening pleasure.

1) USE OF HEADPHONES IS MANDATORY. Through STEREO HEADPHONES you will enter the 4th Dimension (Bardo 18);...

3) DO, HOWEVER, LISTEN MORE THAN ONCE. It may possibly sound "stupid" to you at first. This simply means that you are not yet acculturated and cannot therefore truly "listen." There is an underlying linearity and multiple layers of contradictory profundity if you but have ears to hear. ...

8) ALWAYS SURFACE FROM THE HYPNOSIS SLOWLY. Just as the trance state has the power to heal, SO CAN IT DESTROY OR MAKE ILL. "Coming out" of the tape is not unlike a total rebirth experience (IF you "come out" successfully, that is). If you have trouble reentering the Earth plane, focus on "Bob" and chant his name. Then try to remember your own name, and chant that for awhile. Do not eat for at least two days after the experience. 4

Public listener-supported radio stations across America started playing the audio tapes and garnering more publicity and fans for the church. This eventually led to a syndicated radio show, called The Hour of Slack. The church became fodder for innumerable talk shows on radio, where much misinformation was spread. The church was compared to such real cults as Scientology and Hare Krishna, especially by fundamentalists who failed to catch the satiric humor, and took it at face value. Pranksters also called in with outrageous tales of satanic rituals and demonic doings. Those who "got the humor" of the church of the SubGenius enjoyed taunting and fooling those who did not understand.

Cults on the Internet

The personal computer age has brought the church, first onto electronic bulletin boards, and then with the development of the world wide net, onto internet home pages and user groups' chat rooms. The church has its own home page, and other people have added their own home pages to give their own "take" on the church. Stang has been invited to "preach" at various gatherings of New Age Consciousness festivals and further spread the word. The church claims to have at least 6,000 members who have sent in \$20.00 to become "ministers", and its three books have sold from 15,000 to 45,000 copies each. Stang mentions such celebrity members as R. Crumb, Pee Wee Herman, Mark Mothersbaugh of singing group DEVO, and movie director Jonathan Demme. 5

Besides spoofing religion, Stang does feel the Church of the SubGenius has a serious purpose to show that most religions and cults are doing more damage than good. When asked how the church is different from other churches, Stang responded:

All the rest are liars. We are liars too, for sure, but we're the only ones that are halfway honest about our lying. We come right out and admit all the things the other churches won't say: that we're in it for money, that God isn't actually paying any attention (although "Bob" will, if you pay him enough money, and all kinds of fake Gods will, if you pay them much attention), that all organized religion is based on the "US VERSUS THEM" hate concept. The bottom line for other religions (and philosophies, and political parties) is: "We're right, God said so, and everything different from us is BAD." The Conspiracy

religions depend on the fear and hatred of anything different. We rejoice in the 'different.' It's going to take something very 'different' to get this overpopulated planet out of the mess it's in. Not necessarily US--but we're helping to pave the way, to help see that this new "something" isn't burned at the stake like Martin Luther King Jr., Wilhelm Reich or JFK. Not to mention poor ol' Jim Jones, David Koresh and Charlie Manson! 6

With success, the Church of the SubGenius has faced hoaxers and people wanting to make money trading on the "good name" of the church. One such person is a Canadian by the name of Bob Dean, who put together his own radio show in Toronto, claiming to be J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, the founder of the Church of the SubGenius. Dean has marketed not only his own radio show, but also tapes and CDs of his own material which he claims to be the official output of the church. Stang is understandably angry but doesn't have the money to sue in Canadian courts to stop Dean and his money-spinning operation. 7

What are the principles of the Church of the SubGenius? There is a world-wide conspiracy of those who rule to keep the rest of us confused and unhappy. In this way, the ruling group, the so-called Normals keep the rest of us creative, individualistic Abnormals from achieving our potential. To achieve our potential and lead satisfying lives, we need an essential attitude of well-being or confidence. The SubGenius word for this concept is slack. Stang explains the central concept of "slack" and its importance:

What you don't have enough of. What nobody has enough

of. What They didn't "cut" you some of. Those who say don't know, and those who know don't say--as the Hells Angels said, which leads one to wonder why they, or I, said it in the first place. Slack is basically Something for Nothing, perfect luck, achievement without ability. It's like the Tao. It's nothing and everything. Mostly, everything. Everyone was born with Original Slack, but the Conspiracy of the Normals programs you to replace it with False Slack--like lame counterfeit SubGenius imitation albums, say, or (much more frequently) nerve-wracking jobs to pay for fancy gizmos and high status among the other Cage Men. The Conspiracy is a confederacy of dunces who don't even know they're wrecking their own freedom by squelching everybody else's. 8

The Church of the SubGenius draws on the attraction of conspiracy theories which are so prevalent today. In addition, the common feeling that the world is getting worse through environmental pollution and overcrowding is brought into play. The recent mass suicides of the members of the Heavens Gate cult as well as the suicide and murders of the Solar Cult in Switzerland and French-speaking Canada show that the feeling that the world is ending soon and the faithful will be rescued by aliens from other worlds has adherents who firmly believe in this. A SubGenius follower spells out the feeling in an exaggerated manner on his own home page:

Foolish doomsayers claim that the sky is falling. It's not of course; however, THE EARTH IS CAVING IN. The pesticides Grandpa used are leaving their brands on the new babies' genes.

The kids get better drugs in grade school now than you did in college. There are cities of 30 million each all over the world, full of people who are starting to want back what they think YOU TOOK, and yet you have to work like a dog just to keep what you THINK you have. ... The True SubGenni, the Chosen Ones, the High Unpredictables, shall be rewarded in the great Rupture of 1998, X-Day, when the Men from Planet X will come; and we shall be LIFTED UP, in Power and glory, to the Escape Vessels of the Sex Goddesses, fleeing the cataclysms on Earth while being TRANSFORMED into OverMen and UberFemmes, SUPERIOR MUTANTS who will lead a NEW RACE (the MASTER RACE, because it comes in ALL COLORS) to the PROMISED LAND, the Pleasure Dimension of ETERNAL SLACK AND CYTORSPASMIC OOZQUIRT. 9

The internet has dramatically increased the visibility of the Church of the SubGenius, through user groups. There are two groups (alt.slack and alt.binaries.slack) where people can conduct conversations at any time of the day with anyone who is interested. Messages by E-mail appear one after another on the screen and anybody can join at any point in the conversation. The syndicated radio program called The Hour of Slack can be listened to by using RealAudio software, which can be downloaded into one's own computer for free.

Another useful tool for getting out information is the official Church of the SubGenius home page, which includes pages devoted to recent news, updates, goods for sale, and public gatherings. Public

gatherings are called "devivals", an obvious reference to fundamentalist Christian revival meetings. About thirty of these "devivals" have taken place in the last few years, all around the United States. Separate pages give reports on each one, with photos and "sound bites" which can be heard by using the RealAudio program.

A report on the 1997 X Day End o' the World Drill 2 held July 4, 5, and 6 at the Brushwood Folklore Center, a 180 acre campground equipped for rock shows and festivals, shows pictures of young people in jeans and t-shirts standing around bonfires, burning crosses and listening to rock group performances. Various other performance artists do things like piercing their tongues with nails, or standing in close proximity to exploding firecrackers. Rituals based on Christianity and old European pagan practises are parodied. For example, a mass nude baptism, called a "Bobtism" takes place in a giant swimming pool. A parody re-enactment of the Biblical Last Supper and the Crucifixion took place as well as a Kool-Aid Mass, presided over by a full-size, cardboard-cutout of Jim Jones, the leader of a cult who forced his followers to commit suicide by drinking poison-laced Kool-Aid in 1978. A particularly tasteless exhibit on the grounds shows a doll in a coffin labeled "Jon-Benet Ramsey," the six-year old girl who was brutally murdered in 1996. Another "ritual" consists of a golfer hitting a plastic doll's head, referred to as "the Bleeding Head of Arnold Palmer." John Searcy, in his home page entitled Dictionary of the Gods, gives a thumb-nail sketch of the ritual:

A plaster golf-trophy head of the famous world-cup golfer Arnold Palmer, smeared with red paint, which is actually the

oldest living thing in the Universe and a being of immeasurable power (Arnold Palmer himself is actually only a cheap replica of The Head, crafted by the slack-draining Satan.) Indeed, the Head must be "launched" with a golf club exactly once every Earth year to prevent its immense power from rupturing the Universe itself! Currently, the Head is being utilized by the Xists to combat the sinister Yists or Yacatisma (who, strangely enough, are working with the world-cup golfer, Lee Trevino) in an intergalactic war of epic proportions. In fact, every major world-cup golfer is working with a different race of aliens involved in this cosmic battle, whose final outcome is yet to be determined. 10

The Church of the SubGenius also has a page called "the Scatalog" devoted to the sale of goods relating to the church. For sale are books, comic books, pamphlets, audio and video cassettes, compact discs, cups, coffee mugs, caps, T-shirts, boxer shorts, keychains, clocks, refrigerator magnets, stickers, bumper stickers, buttons and pins. Among the books for sale are *The Book of the SubGenius*, *High Weirdness by Mail* (a non-fiction guide to cults), *Three-Fisted Tales of "Bob"* (a collection of short stories), and a sequel to the first book, which is entitled *Revelation X -- The "Bob" Apocryphon*. This new book is advertised as follows:

SCARIER THAN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND
SCIENTOLOGY PUT TOGETHER! MORE NEEDLESSLY
COMPLICATED THAN THE QABALLAH! MORE VAGUE AND
AMBIGUOUS THAN THE I CHING OR ASTROLOGY! MORE

SHEER, BRAZEN BULLSHIT THAN EVEN THE BOOK OF MORMON- YET INFINITELY MORE ACCURATE THAN PROJECT BLUE BOOK and THE WARREN COMMISSION REPORT, COMBINED!! 11

There is also a Conspiracy Hotline Rant phone number, where one can hear a two minute recording of Ivan Stang or Philo Drummond explicating points of doctrine or commenting on current affairs. A payment of \$ 30.00 will obtain a membership card, a minister's ordination card, and a subscription to the official newsletter The Stark Fist of Removal.

On the official Church of the SubGenius links page is a listing of over fifty different, independent internet home pages all related in one way or another with the SubGenius philosophy. One site, produced by Noah Stewart and entitled Independence Day--comparison and analysis--X Day uses photos, graphics, and text to compare the hit American science fiction movie of 1996 and the SubGenius philosophy as to when and how aliens will invade and attack earth. 12 Another page entitled First Online Church of "Bob" allows "Reverend Modemac" the opportunity to describe his life and doings from 1987 when he got his first computer, through his years organizing and participating in electronic bulletin boards, and finally his establishing his own internet page. Along the way he gives an abbreviated history of the Church of the Subgenius and his criticism of real cults like Scientology, which he feels people should be warned against. 13 Tim Casady, in his page entitled Five Tons of Slack, appropriates the attitudes and principles of the Church of the SubGenius to develop his own parody of Zen and

martial arts, which he calls Dung Fu. 14

An analysis of the huge number of internet sites devoted to just one of many cults or parodies of cults shows that the internet allows people to express themselves and communicate with other people about what is important to them. As computers become more popular with an attendant increase in connecting to the internet, it has become apparent that the internet will become the most influential of the mass media in society.

Notes

- 1 J.R. Dobbs, *The Book of the SubGenius*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p.2-3.
- 2 *ibid.* p.128.
- 3 <http://sunsite.unc.edu/subgenius/bigfist/classic/classics/GRAY-AREAS-SubGInt.html>
- 4 <http://sunsite.unc.edu/subgenius/bigfist/classic/classics/Tapelnst.html>
- 5 <http://sunsite.unc.edu/subgenius/bigfist/classic/classics/GRAY-AREAS-SubGInt.html>
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 <http://www.etext.org/Quartz/subgenius/end.times>
- 10 <http://rampages.onramp.net/~searcy/gods.html>
- 11 <http://www.subgenius.com/scatolog2.html>
- 12 <http://www.ccia.st-thomas.on.ca/~nstewart/id4.html>
- 13 <http://www.tiac.net/users/modemac/>
- 14 <http://www.enteract.com/~guru/guru.html>