



Edited by
Wouter J. Hanegraaff,
Peter J. Forshaw and
Marco Pasi

Hermes Explains

Thirty
Questions
about Western
Esotericism

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Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism

Celebrating the 20th anniversary of the centre for History of Hermetic
Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam

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Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter J. Forshaw and Marco Pasi

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Religion can't be a joke, right?

J. Christian Greer

Laughter has a history all its own. In spite of the prominence of humour across the evolution of our species, though, it is among the least scrutinised spheres of human experience.¹ As Mikhail Bakhtin showed, clowns and fools, like jokes and hoaxes, are dismissed by scholars as either “purely negative satire” or else as “recreational drollery deprived of philosophical content.”² In short, humour is not taken seriously. A more complex picture of laughter can be gleaned from the study of post-War American esotericism, and in particular the psychedelic church movement. The extraordinarily rich theology of laughter produced by these outlaw religious fellowships is the subject of this essay.

Dawning in the early 1960s, the ideology of “psychedelicism,” as I call it, was established by a handful of fellowships united in the belief that cannabis, as well as other vision-inducing substances, unlocked the highest spiritual potential of humanity.³ According to these groups, psychedelics (including LSD, DMT, and mescaline) were not mere drugs, but “sacraments” that worked much in the same way as meditation, yoga, and prayer – albeit far more expediently. In the words of Art Kleps, hailed by Timothy Leary as the Martin Luther of psychedelicism, “[a]cid is *not* easier than traditional methods, it’s just faster, and sneakier.”⁴ Not all psychedelic fellowships styled themselves after churches, however. Psychedelicism took on a variety of institutional forms, such as secret brotherhoods,⁵ experimental therapy centres,⁶ and anarchist conspiracies.⁷ Some groups that refused to

1 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 4.

2 Ibid, 12.

3 Derived from the psychical discourse of “consciousness expansion,” *psychedelicism* suggests a heterogeneous entanglement of esoteric theories and practices, which underwent reformulation and adaptation in the decades subsequent to its debut in *The Doors of Perception* (1954) by Aldous Huxley. Neither wholly religious nor scientific, psychedelicist doctrines emerged as a highly volatile response to the “problem of disenchantment,” Egil Asprem’s term for the sociohistorical process by which modern intellectuals in the West struggled with the persistence of “magic” despite the alleged success of secularization. See Asprem, *Problem of Disenchantment*, passim; and his essay in this volume.

4 Kleps, *Boo Hoo Bible*, 19.

5 Schou, *Orange Sunshine*.

6 Kripal, *Esalen*, 112-134.

7 Greer, “Discordianism,” forthcoming.

describe themselves with words like “religion” or “church” did so because they understood the transcendental flash of divine illumination induced by psychedelics to be too sacrosanct to put into words.⁸ For groups like the Merry Pranksters, the trappings of religion seemed positively outdated.

Amidst this reverential approach to drugs, humour took on a metaphysical significance. According to the foremost psychedelicist, Timothy Leary, “the entire consciousness movement was dedicated to a playful rather than serious approach: ... [T]he essence of consciousness change is *humor and gentle satire*. It actually gets quite theological.”⁹ The theological tradition of psychedelicist humour reached its climax with the Discordian Society, an anarchistic fellowship formed in the mid-1970s, which “disguised” its teachings as an intricate jest. In the words of its principal spokesperson, Robert Anton Wilson, “many people consider Discordianism as a complicated joke disguised as a new religion. I prefer to consider it a new religion disguised as a complicated joke.”¹⁰ That is, Discordianism was neither just a joke, nor a religion, but a higher synthesis created out of both. The fundamental element of psychedelicism is the dissolution of boundaries, especially the border between sacred and profane.

In what follows, I shall survey the esoteric theologies of laughter that animated the psychedelic church movement.¹¹ This account of sacred humour begins with the post-secular bohemianism of the 1950s Beat Generation and ultimately concludes with the Church of the SubGenius, a revivalist psychedelic sect that flourished in the 1980s and 1990s. Altogether, the enchanted mode of laughter underlying this marginal current in American religious history reflected a new consciousness oriented in utopian togetherness, rather than the joyless atomisation of modern life.

In the opening lines of *Howl* (1956), Allen Ginsberg identified the “angelheaded hipster” as the paragon of authentic religious seeking. Published a year later, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) placed this archetype for “hip” spirituality centre stage. His visionary travelogue concluded with an alternative image of the angelheaded hipster: “the HOLY GOOF.”¹² The holy goof was not some foolhardy ignoramus; rather, this highly sensitive soul embodied an improvisational form of piety unbound by the restrictive values of bourgeois society. This figure had risen above the dogmatic solemnity

8 Davis, *High Weirdness*, 156.

9 Leary, *Pranks*, 75.

10 Versluis, *American Gurus*, 130; Wilson, *Coincidence*, 203.

11 For an alternative analysis of the ludic religious sensibility of the psychedelic church movement, see Davis, *High Weirdness*, 156-160.

12 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 183.

of organised religion, and, in Kerouac's words, embodied "the tremendous energy of a new kind of American saint."¹³

Kerouac modelled his concept of saintliness on the "Zen lunatic," a special class of spiritual master that populates the annals of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism. The Zen lunatics used shocking and seemingly sacrilegious behaviour (termed *upaya*, or "expedient means") to jolt their pupils into *satori*, the momentary state in which the mind is liberated from its attachment to ego. At the moment of illumination, students were often depicted as laughing in Zen narratives. According to Conrad Hyers, laughter was self-conscious deployed in Zen as "an expression of enlightenment, liberation, and inner harmony."¹⁴ Elaborating on this theology of laughter, Kerouac and his close-knit circle of "Dharma Bums" devised their own heterodox school of Buddhist philosophy, "Beat Zen."

Stimulated more by amphetamine and marijuana than meditation, Beat Zen was a distinctly New World reinvention of Buddhism and Daoism.¹⁵ For all of its innovations, though, it retained the assumption that the mind is naturally enlightened and needs only to be returned to its perfected state. The Zen model of salvation underlies not only the improvisational piety of the holy goof, but every psychedelic theology of laughter that would follow after it. These later forms of *upaya*, however, varied considerably.

The Zen masters of the past employed techniques such as the *koan* to trigger *satori*. The Dharma Bums, on the other hand, embraced the mirthful play of the spontaneous mind as the most expedient means of dissolving the conditioned repression of natural thoughts, feelings, and desires. Joy, then, was the royal road for lifting up a spiritually fallen humanity. Kerouac's famed "rucksack revolution" speech from *The Dharma Bums* (1958) offers what is perhaps the clearest testament to the apocalyptic power of goofing:

I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution, thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures.¹⁶

13 Lardas, *Bop Apocalypse*, 84.

14 Hyers, "Humor in Zen," 270.

15 Wilson, Personal Interview.

16 Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 74.

In this prophecy, the author envisioned an entire generation of holy fools enlightening all living creatures through improvisational piety. It would be hard to find a more apt description of the Flower Power movement of the late-1960s, then still years away.

Kerouac coined the term “holy goof” in honour of his friend, Neal Cassady. This consummate Beat saint was canonised first as the “secret hero” of *Howl*, and then as the iconic Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*.¹⁷ The life of Cassady draws a direct line from the ludic religious sensibilities of the Beats to the psychedelic church movement. After having served as the muse for Kerouac and Ginsberg, Cassady migrated to California, where he fell in with Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters, the paradigmatic holy fools of the Love Generation. As the pilot of their auto-motive commune, the Pranksters’ day-glo bus *Further*, this angelheaded hipster translated holy goofing into Kesey’s “merry” brand of psychedelicism.

The coalescence of the Pranksters’ doctrines was the subject of Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968). The central conceit of his vivid portrait of early West Coast psychedelicism is the “kairos,” a Greek term signifying the experiential flash of supreme understanding out of which religions emerge. The kairos had descended to earth in the form of lysergic acid diethylamide, which the Pranksters combined with their own brand of improvisational piety to dissolve the boundaries of the self into a higher transcendental unity.¹⁸ Whereas the Dharma Bums were content to cultivate enlightenment amongst their own tight-knit circle, the Pranksters were compelled by the kairos to “tootle the multitudes” in the form of pranks.¹⁹

The Merry Pranksters’ improvisational cultural interventions represented a breakthrough in the theology of sacred laughter. To be sure, their pranks are not to be confused with mean-spirited hijinks. Rather, they were loosely structured forms of productive play designed to dissolve psycho-social boundaries for dozens, if not hundreds of people at the same time. Their most famous stunts consisted of a series of approximately twenty public gatherings hosted by the Pranksters along the West Coast between 1965-1968, collectively known as the Acid Tests. Legal in California until 1966, LSD was readily supplied in cups of “electric kool-aid” to those who attended these experiments in multi-media, interactive theatre. The vernacular culture of psychedelicism so prominently displayed in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco (and later stereotyped in the media as the “hippie” movement)

17 Ginsberg, *Howl*, 3.

18 Shipley, *Psychedelic Mysticism*, passim.

19 Wolfe, *Electric Kool-Aid*, 99.

was born out of these attempts at the mass dissolution of conditioned behaviour. As Wolfe pointed out, the Pranksters' pious merriment generated an eruption of spiritual jubilation that birthed the era of Flower Power.

Not all psychedelicist doctrines were merry. On the East Coast, Timothy Leary fostered a psychedelicist culture dominated by the trappings of organised religion. Promulgating a solemn theology focused on death and rebirth, Leary's fellowship, "The League of Spiritual Discovery," worked to legitimate the use of psychedelics in the court of public opinion by producing serious-minded journals,²⁰ liturgical manuals,²¹ and catechisms.²² They also legally incorporated as a church, and issued literature encouraging all other psychedelicist groups to do the same.²³ Anchored between these two distinctive psychedelicist cultures was Art Kleps' Neo-American Church, a dissenting religious body that was equal parts sacramental, improvisational, and belligerent.

Kleps earned himself a reputation as the "Martin Luther" of psychedelicism due to his uncompromising demand for reform, both within and outside the psychedelic movement (see Fig. 1). The *kairos* generated by the sacrament convinced him that institutionalised religions were irredeemably fraudulent. Accordingly, the Neo-American catechisms lambasted co-religionists for their "phony attempts to make psychedelia look like just one more swindle that can be blended into all the other swindles."²⁴ The time had come, he proclaimed, for psychedelicists to "develop our own forms, our own language, and our own standards, as every genuine religious novelty has done in the past."²⁵ The natural language of psychedelicism, Kleps insisted, was humour. Heavily influenced by Beat Zen, he argued that only "[m]assive doses of absurdity" would prevent their authentic religion from degenerating into "the usual collection of dead-letter laws."²⁶ Kleps' insistence on emphasising the ludic spirit of psychedelicism won him widespread approval among psychedelicists (or "heads"); however, it ultimately served as the undoing of his church.

Though there was a handful of Neo-American fellowships that held regular services, Neo-American affiliation primarily functioned as a strategic means of legal protection. Psychedelicists joined the church as a pro-active

20 *The Psychedelic Review* (ed. Metzner), 1963-1971.

21 Leary, Alpert and Metzner, *Psychedelic Experience*.

22 Leary, *Psychedelic Prayers*.

23 *Ibid*, *Start your Own Religion*, passim; Lander, "Legalize Spiritual Discovery," 176.

24 Kleps, *Boo Hoo Bible*, 24

25 *Ibid*, 24.

26 *Ibid*, 3.



Fig. 1: The seal of the church features a Three-Eyed Toad above is a banner that reads: *Victory Over Horseshit!* Defying the gentle image associated with the hippie, this pugnacious slogan reflected the church's insistence that the psychedelic experience alone was genuinely transcendent, and that all other forms of religious belief were elaborate scams, or "horseshit". (Joan Kelps)

measure, so that if they were busted they could take refuge in the freedom of religion clause in the First Amendment of the US Constitution. Kleps' church demanded the right to use psychedelics sacramentally, and cited the legal precedent handed down in *The People vs. Woody*, 1964, which recognised the Native American Church's right to use peyote ceremonially. Taking it upon themselves to decide what types of beliefs constitute genuinely religious sentiments, the courts dismissed the Neo-American Church as nothing more than a calculated charade that justified drug-taking.²⁷ The courts were right, of course, but for the wrong reasons. True, the church was artifice; however, instead of being *mere parody*, Kleps' fellowship exploited traditional religious forms as an expedient means of protecting a force greater than religion itself. In sum, the church structure was yet another form of *upaya*.

Instead of arguing their case in the courts, the most militant psychedelists fought for their rights in the streets. The late 1960s saw an escalation of

²⁷ Newman, "What is a Church?"

the war in Vietnam, a spate of ghetto uprisings, as well as an intensification in the legal persecution of psychedelicists. All of this transformed the mirthful inflection of the Prankster's laughter into "Flower Power," or what I call *psychedelic militancy*. Leading the way was "The Youth International Party," or Yippies! (the exclamation point included in the name was intended to express the joyful exuberance that animated this group).²⁸ The brainchild of Abbie and Anita Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Nancy Kurshan, and Paul Krassner, this exuberant band of self-styled "Groucho Marxists" advanced a ludic program of non-violent cultural revolution that utilised the mocking laughter of the crowd to demean the totemic symbols of the established social order.

The Yippies! wielded guerrilla theatre, hoaxes, and pranks as weapons against the nerve centres of government control. In the words of Joseph Urgo, "Yippie laughter ... was aimed at awakening the unconscious 'establishment' figures with whom they clashed."²⁹ With their eyes firmly set on *converting* the opposition, this band of acid communists staged a series of high-profile farces that collapsed the distinction between sacred and profane.³⁰ Arguably, their most successful prank was the "Exorcism of the Pentagon" on October 27, 1967. The intermingling of sacred and profane that day can be distilled into a single snapshot: picture the acclaimed Thelemite filmmaker Kenneth Anger underneath a flatbed truck performing an occult ritual involving Tarot cards, while the Fugs front-man Ed Sanders, standing on top of the flatbed, led ten thousand of his brothers and sisters in an ancient Hittite incantation (crafted with the help of the arch-bohemian Harry Smith) with the refrain "Out Demons Out."³¹ The fact that the assembled hippie warriors were costumed as witches, warlocks, and wizards made this scene all the more mind-blowing. Their exorcism succeeded in winning over three members of the military police, who allegedly dropped their weapons and joined the chanting, thereby proving that the optimism of Flower Power was not totally naïve.³²

Of all the psychedelic churches, the Discordian Society devised the most elaborate theology of laughter (see Fig. 2). Founded by Gregory Hill and Kerry Thornley in the late 1950s, this sect venerated Eris, the goddess of chaos, as their patron deity. Chaos, in their view, was not violent lawlessness; rather, it was the

28 Jezer, *Abbie Hoffman*, 123; Hoffman, *Revolution For the Hell of It*, 81.

29 Urgo, "Comedic Impulses," 88.

30 Farber, *Chicago 68*, 3-55.

31 Recordings of Sanders' chanting have been preserved on The Fugs' *Tenderness Junction*, (1968).

32 Katzman, "In the Life on Bald Mountain," 3. The Pentagon ritual was the first of numerous other exorcisms performed by the Yippies!; see Sanders, *Fug You*, 300-301.

Tests By Doctors Prove It Possible To Shrink

= On Occultism =

Magicians, especially since the Gnostic and the Quabala influences, have sought higher consciousness through the assimilation and control of universal opposites - - good/evil, positive/negative, male/female, etc. But due to the steadfast pomposity of ritualism inherited from the ancient methods of the shaman, occultists have been blinded to what is perhaps the two most important pairs of apparent or earth-plane opposites: ORDER/DISORDER and SERIOUS/HUMOROUS.

Magicians, and their progeny the scientists, have always taken themselves and their subject in an orderly and sober manner, thereby disregarding an essential metaphysical balance. When magicians learn to approach philosophy as a malleable art instead of an immutable Truth, and learn to appreciate the absurdity of man's endeavors, then they will be able to pursue their art with a lighter heart and perhaps gain a clearer understanding of it, and therefore gain more effective magic. CHAOS IS ENERGY.

This is an essential challenge to the basic concepts of all western occult though, and POEE is humbly pleased to offer the first major breakthrough in occultism since Solomon.

"Study
Demonology
With An
Enemy
This
Sunday"
sez Thom, Gnos

00061



Fig. 2: Taken out of the 4th edition of the *Principia Discordia* (1970), this page lays out the implications of humor for occultism. According to this Discordia holy book, the source of *true* metaphysical power arises in the balance between seriousness and humor, which the occult tradition of the last three thousand years has failed to recognize.

ontological substratum of pure potentiality innocent of all distinctions and boundaries, much in the fashion of the ancient Dao. By the mid-1970s, chaos had become the emblem of psychedelicism and its theology of sacred laughter.

Discordianism was divided into two tendencies. First there was the Erisian school of Ho Chi Zen (the alter-ego of Kerry Thornley) and Camden Benares (b. John Overton), who elaborated a “second wave” of Beat Zen that was explicitly anarchist. The other, more prominent branch, associated with Robert Anton Wilson, operated as a clandestine counterintelligence agency. The principal touchstone for this branch was *Operation Mindfuck*, or OM, a de-centralised campaign of non-violent guerrilla warfare consisting of *hit-and-run* psychic attacks that were intended to provoke internal realisations leading to the dissolution of habitual mental patterns. Their *upaya* consisted of “mindfucking” people into illumination.

OM originated as a response to the Garrison Investigation of 1967, during which Thornley was fingered as a co-conspirator in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Furthermore, the District Attorney of New Orleans, Jim Garrison, also accused Thornley's Discordian fellowship of being a front for the CIA.³³ After Thornley learned that Garrison's investigation team believed in the existence of the Illuminati, he called upon his small group of co-religionists to inundate the D.A.'s office with bizarre and imposing communiqués signed by the Bavarian Illuminati. To substantiate this hoax, they planted articles concerning the Illuminati in mainstream media outlets, as well as in the underground press.³⁴ The Discordians declared victory after articles about the Illuminati started to appear with ever-greater frequency. Assessing this aspect of OM, Robert Anton Wilson reflected that “[w]e did not regard this as a hoax or prank in the ordinary sense. We still considered it guerrilla ontology.”³⁵ The Discordian school of psychedelicism was *guerrilla* insofar as it was organised as a clandestine web of independent cadres (known as “cabals”), and *ontological* in that it subverted the reductionist conceptual schemes that define reality. The Discordians represented the Flower Power branch of “Armed Love,” the violent Left-Wing anti-imperialistic resistance that would terrorise the US government throughout the 1970s. In the early 1980s, the Discordians' militant *esprit* was taken up by The Church of the SubGenius, a mail-order religion operating out of Dallas, Texas.

Established in 1980, The Church of the SubGenius offered itself as a self-consciously absurdist cult based on the evidently bogus prophecies of

33 Gorightly, *Prankster*, 90-110.

34 Ibid, *Historia Discordia*, 24.

35 Wilson, *The Illuminati Papers*, 2.

J.R. “Bob” Dobbs. The apocalyptic beliefs of the church parodied doomsday cults, while its emphatic preachers modelled their personas after Christian televangelists. During the mid-1980s, every manner of prankster, hoaxer, and “bold surrealist” gravitated to the Church.³⁶ Transformed into a hub for underground networking, this fellowship allied itself with avant-garde vandals like Negativland, the Cacophony Society, Neoism, and the Billboard Liberation Front. Vandalism, in the name of “Bob,” was conceived not merely as “pranks,” but an enchanted mode of opposition that demanded an end to the entire social order. According to the Church’s co-founder, Rev. Ivan Stang,

[p]ranks are part of it; but when hundreds or even thousands of creative billboard defacings are carried out all over the world for almost 10 years, all fitting into one unified theme, can these any longer be called “pranks?” “Crimes against normality” might be more fitting[.]³⁷

According to Stang, the Church’s performative constructs demonstrated a totalising refutation of societal norms. Harkening back to Kleps’ inflexible faith in the authenticity of psychedelic humour, the Church adopted the motto: “fuck’em if they can’t take a joke.”³⁸

The psychedelic theology of laughter can be summarised as follows: “nothing is true unless it makes you laugh, but you don’t really understand it until it makes you cry.”³⁹ First appearing in the Discordian magnum opus *Illuminatus!* (1975), this theological adage suggests that enlightenment begins when the mind is liberated from the conditioned attachment to self. From the enlightened perspective, all of the sound and fury of the world appears as a comical farce devoid of meaning. However, detachment is here portrayed as the pre-requisite for compassion: the sacred laughter of the psychedelicist is consummated in the higher realisation that life entails a perpetual cycle of pain and suffering. Motivated to alleviate the pain of others, the holy goof employs jest, satire, and slapstick to lead his brothers and sisters out of the delusion of ego, into a new, jubilant way of life.

36 Greer, “SubGenius,” (forthcoming).

37 Stang, “The Church of the Subgenius(TM).”

38 *Book of the SubGenius*, 34

39 Wilson and Shea, *Illuminatus!*, 299.