



Evolutionary Controversy and a Side of Pasta: The Flying Spaghetti Monster and the Subversive Function of Religious Parody

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Abstract: The role that religious understandings should play in the science classrooms of public schools has been particularly contentious in some parts of the United States, and has thus become a target for the recently-invented Flying Spaghetti Monster. Though many monsters may inspire terror or serve as scapegoats for internal psychological or external cultural conflicts, monsters can also inspire laughter. This laughter may be no less subversive than terror, calling attention to and mischievously ridiculing mythic narratives, beliefs, and widespread cultural faiths that are held sacred. By inserting a faceless ball of pasta into a creation narrative considered sacred by many Americans, through subtle sexuality, and patent absurdity, the Flying Spaghetti Monster aims to confound those who believe metaphysical explanations should be actively taught in science classrooms alongside evolutionary theory, and it offers a potent example of how monstrous humor can be used as a tool of playful subversion.

[1] The person privileged enough to be touched by a noodly appendage is never the same. Not just any noodly appendage will do, however. Specifically, the noodly appendage must belong to a curious amalgamation of pasta and gastropod, formally known in its beatific incarnation as the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

[2] In mythic time, the Flying Spaghetti Monster's legend reaches back 5,000 years. In internet time, the Flying Spaghetti Monster is of recent vintage. Created by website designer Bobby Henderson in response to the Kansas Board of Education's November 2005 decision to downplay evolutionary theory within the science curriculum, the Flying Spaghetti Monster serves as a playful foil to a particular type of theistic viewpoint that is commonly referred to as

intelligent design.¹ As we underscore throughout this paper, one of the roles of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is to draw attention to what many people have objected to as an inappropriate and even absurd muddle of science and religion in public school classrooms.

[3] That Henderson chose a monster to highlight what he considers a categorical violation (i.e., between science and religion) may not be surprising to those with a notion of how monsters function across cultures. Indeed, mixing categories and violating boundaries is a primary characteristic of monsters, and many of the scholars who theorize about monsters underscore the liminal and transgressive cultural functions of mythical beasts and deities. What may be surprising, however, is the way in which the Flying Spaghetti Monster relies on humor to transgress these boundaries. Much of contemporary scholarship that deals with monsters – ranging from philosophy (Kearney) and anthropology (Gilmore) to religion (Beal) – rightly points to the terrifying sublimity of the monstrous as one of the preeminent features of monsters. Such monsters may invoke awe or fear, and often serve to delineate the psychological and cultural category of the “other,” the boundary line between chaos and order, or the familiar and the foreign (see, e.g. Kearney 3; Beal 4-5).

[4] While this is undoubtedly an important quality of the monstrous, the Flying Spaghetti Monster serves to illustrate a less-appreciated function of monsters. Though many monsters may inspire terror or serve as scapegoats for cultural conflicts, monsters can also inspire laughter. And this laughter may be no less subversive than terror, calling attention to and playfully ridiculing mythic narratives, beliefs, and widespread cultural faiths that are held sacred. By inserting a faceless (though not eyeless) ball of pasta into a creation narrative considered sacred

by many Americans, through subtle sexuality, and patent absurdity, the Flying Spaghetti Monster aims to confound those who believe metaphysical explanations should be actively taught in science classrooms alongside evolutionary theory. In this playfully deviant role, positing a Flying Spaghetti Monster (and the mythological and soteriological narrative it inhabits) may be a much more effective tactic than tackling advocates of intelligent design head on, calling attention to the absurdity of certain creation-oriented “theories” through a mimesis of absurdity.

[5] Yet there is an additional layer of meaning to the antics of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, for by subverting one form of narrative, He (the Flying Spaghetti Monster is always referred to with a masculine pronoun) consecrates another tangentially. Religious stories are implicitly ridiculed as “imaginary” explanations for the origins and continuance of biological life, which thereby implies that evolutionary narratives (what remains when religious narrative is expunged) are the only stories worthy of consideration.

From a Tennessee School to the Kansas School Board: A Microcosm of Cosmic Narratives

[6] In order to more fully grasp its subversive function, it is necessary to be aware of the particular event that summoned forth the Flying Spaghetti Monster as a tongue-in-cheek rival to intelligent design. For this, we must turn away from the marginal zones that monsters haunt to the near-geographical center of North America, the state of Kansas. The November 8, 2005 decision of the Kansas Board of Education to excise all mention in public school classrooms of evolution or of cosmological descriptions that implied more than a few thousand years of earth history reignited a sporadic but ongoing public debate over the relationship (or lack of relationship) between science and religion – a debate that has a considerable historical pedigree.

[7] In 1925, the so-called Scopes monkey trial, a now familiar controversy concerning the teaching of evolutionary theory in public schools, stirred the American imagination and offered a highly publicized forum for addressing the claim that humans and great apes (chimpanzees, gorillas, and the like) evolved from a common ancestor. The plaintiffs, the state of Tennessee (led by prosecutor William Jennings Bryan), suggested that it was implausible to assume that humans evolved from primates, since the biblical story told a different tale. The strategy of the defendants, on the other hand, was to demonstrate that the biblical narrative was just that – a story – which, if taken literally, led to all manner of inconsistent conclusions. Ultimately, Mr. Scopes and vociferous defense lawyer Clarence Darrow lost the case and were forced to pay a token \$100 fine.²

[8] The debate over the teaching of evolution in schools persisted over the next sixty years, with court decisions consistently backing the constitutional right, and even the necessity (in some cases), of teaching evolutionary theory in science classes. One particularly pivotal judgment was reached in the 1968 Supreme Court case *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, which demanded that a law must a) have been passed with a purely secular purpose; b) neither advance, nor inhibit the practice of religion; and c) not result in significant government entanglement with religion (George 852).

[9] In 1999, the Kansas State Board of Education challenged this series of court rulings by passing new science education standards that included no references to the age of the Earth, the Big Bang theory, or to macroevolution (the development of new species through genetic adaptation). Furthermore, the theory of evolution was not to be included in the state's high-

school assessment exams, so students would not be required to demonstrate any familiarity with its tenets (Scott 813).

[10] Public reaction was mixed: conservative Christian constituencies provided an outpouring of support for the measure (see, for examples, Brumfiel 267), while others suggested that the move amounted to a tacit endorsement of a covertly Christian creation story (Scott).³ Scientists, civil liberties unions, and others concerned with preserving the separation between church and state soon mounted court challenges to the Kansas ruling. In the next school board election, the conservative majority that had relaxed the former state standards was voted out. But the monster had already been unleashed, so to speak. Illinois, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania followed Kansas' lead, passing education requirements that discouraged the teaching of evolutionary theory, thereby implying that evolutionary theory was misleading and/or inadequate. As for Kansas, the school board once again achieved a conservative majority in 2004, and the game of see-saw continued; in 2005 the board reestablished the basic tenets of its own 1999 ruling.

[11] One of the persistent facets of this debate is the sometimes extreme dichotomization of religion and science. Though religious understandings and scientific theories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, this is often how the drama of the evolutionary debate is staged. While during the Scopes monkey trial Bryan and his colleagues attempted to directly challenge the legitimacy of science, "intelligent design" theorists have taken an alternate tack, employing scientific language to support a narrative that suggests that "evolution (and modern science in general) are stalking horses for philosophical materialism and atheism" (Scott 815). Of course, there are many positions in between reductive scientific materialism and biblical literalism, and while philosophers of science and other scholars (Midgley; Feyerabend; Lakatos; Toulmin) have

given this a great deal of attention, these more nuanced positions are typically not displayed and dissected in the public eye.⁴

[12] The Flying Spaghetti Monster offers an additional lens through which to view these controversial issues. This internet monster rose from the deep to challenge both a thinly-veiled religious vision of the cosmos that was being promoted as an “alternative theory” to evolution, and the weakened proponents of evolution who continue to fight a piecemeal and rearguard battle against an education system with no national standards, whose implementation largely depends on interpretation by local lawmakers (Brumfiel 267). If nothing else, the Kansas school board controversy has generated an additional platform to discuss such critical American cultural issues as the separation of church and state, local versus federal control of public education, and, of course, the notions of “good” and “bad” science.⁵ The Flying Spaghetti Monster brings these issues to the fore in a mischievous manner, and in a way that demonstrates the subversive power of monstrous humor.

Meet the Flying Spaghetti Monster

[13] For those readers who have yet to come face-to-eyeball with the Flying Spaghetti Monster, conceived by website creator and self-proclaimed “prophet” Bobby Henderson, a brief description is necessary. The Flying Spaghetti Monster, as its name implies, is primarily an unruly tangle of spaghetti pasta. Two meatballs are buried within its noodly nucleus, and two eyestalks – resembling those of a snail – protrude from the bodily mass of spaghetti, presumably providing Him with sight for His divine missions (*see fig. 1*).

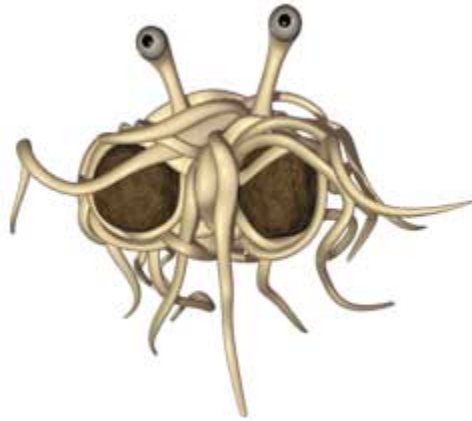


Fig. 1. The Flying Spaghetti Monster, from *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*. Ed. Bobby Henderson. 22 July 2006 <<http://www.venganza.org>>.

In physical stature, the Flying Spaghetti Monster shares the transgressive qualities of other monsters, mixing familiar categories of human and nonhuman, internal and external, animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic.

[14] Consistent with His transgressive noodliness, the cosmos-creating acts performed by the Flying Spaghetti Monster also carry some of these transgressive elements, leading some to point to the Flying Spaghetti Monster's efforts as "Unintelligent design" (Snodgrass and Jaffari 30-31). Massaged into theoretical terms, this unintelligent design represents something of a paradigm shift in conceptualizing the divine: "The Flying Spaghetti Monster, our Creator, isn't very bright... [He's] a dumbass" (Snodgrass and Jaffari 30-31).

[15] The Web version of the Flying Spaghetti Monster's mythic narrative received further elaboration when Henderson published the *Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* in 2006. According to the *Gospel*, the Flying Spaghetti Monster created the cosmos 5,000 years ago,

dividing the water from the firmament, and on the second day of creation, because He could not tread water for very long and had tired of flying, He created the land. ““And,”” He declared, ““let there be a volcano to spew forth beer, which seems like a benevolent idea.’ And the volcano spewed forth beer, and He tasted it, and declared it to be quite good” (Henderson 76). Pleased with His creation, the Flying Spaghetti Monster overindulged in the sweet nectar of the beer volcano, and awoke hungover and muddled (70). In between drunken nights and clumsy, addled afternoons, the Flying Spaghetti Monster managed to generate seas and land (creating land twice, accidentally, because he forgot he had created it the previous day), Heaven, and a midget, which he called Man (72). Man and an equally diminutive woman dwelt in the Olive Garden of Eden (72) for some time, happy and small.

[16] According to Flying Spaghetti Monster cosmogony, there really was a Flood, but it was largely due to one of the Flying Spaghetti Monster’s cooking accidents, and not intended to wipe out the midget race He had created (though He did, admittedly find them to be somewhat irritating) (73-74). The survivors repopulated the earth. Eventually, a short-order cook called Mosey found favor with the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and the Flying Spaghetti Monster taught him to make sauce, and how to eat it with noodles. In addition, the Flying Spaghetti Monster mandated that Mosey and his followers wear eyepatches and carry swords. Mosey, thus, became Pirate Mosey (76-77), the leader of a wild band of pirates – the Flying Spaghetti Monster’s believers and followers – who came to be known as “Pastafarians.”

[17] The most recent centuries have seen a general decline in the number of pirates, a fact that Henderson suggests is directly correlated with the rise in global surface temperature: the fewer pirates there are, the hotter the world gets (*see fig. 2*).

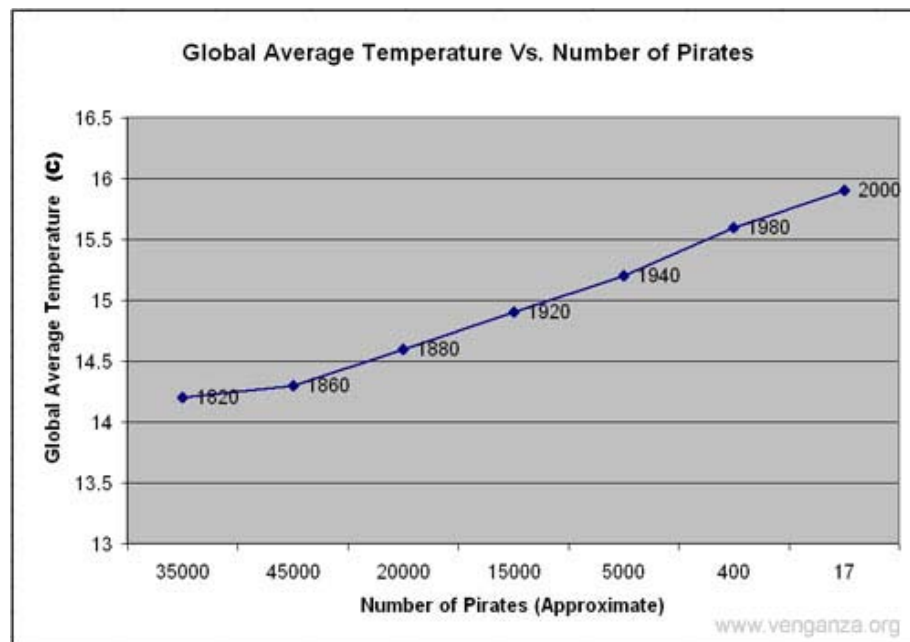


Fig. 2. Global Average Temperature Vs. Number of Pirates, from *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*.

Ed. Bobby Henderson. 22 July 2006 <<http://www.venganza.org>>.

This and other scientific claims of modern-day Pastafarians are, of course, intended to be disputed. For example, the claim that the world was created a mere 5,000 years ago is generally laughable to many geologists, since various geological dating methods suggest an earth-age closer to 4.5 billion years.

[18] Unfortunately for these scientists, writes Henderson, parroting certain biblical literalists, the Flying Spaghetti Monster created the world to look older than it really is to test the faith of his followers (64). To those who argue that scientific evidence directly contradicts these claims,

Henderson asserts that this merely demonstrates that what scientists “[do] not realize is that every time [they] make a measurement, the Flying Spaghetti Monster is there changing the results with His Noodly Appendage. We have numerous texts that describe in detail how this can be possible and the reasons why He does this. He is of course invisible and can pass through normal matter with ease” (108). This unconventional scientific method is lifted from what Henderson believes to be the method of intelligent design proponents, where they first “define [the] conclusion and then gather evidence to support it” (37).

[19] If statements like these are meant to underscore the lengths to which some people will go to make room for a god or Intelligent Designer, in the end, Henderson has modest goals for his own project. “Pastafarians,” he says, “are a community of peaceful and open-minded worshippers, which means that anything we’ve said or done to offend people was meant only in the spirit of promoting greater understanding and awareness.” Underscoring the madness in his method, Henderson concludes, “It has been said that the best sauce requires an occasional stir or two...and so we have done our best to stir the waters of belief in the hopes of converting just a few more Pirates to His Noodly Goodness. RAmen” (166). The Flying Spaghetti Monster does indeed “stir the sauce” of the evolutionary debate, and the monstrous humor it utilizes is worth a closer look.

Monstrous Subversion: Terror and Humor

[20] A great deal of scholarship about monsters has focused on the terror that monsters can, and in many cases do, inspire.⁶ As anthropologist David Gilmore categorically asserts, “Monsters share certain characteristics no matter where they appear: they are always aggressive, gigantic,

man-eating, malevolent, bizarre in shape, gruesome, atavistic, powerful and gratuitously violent”

(ix). Gilmore’s *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*

surveys a variety of monsters from various cultures that share these qualities and produce a response of “half horror, half reverence” from humans.

[21] Likewise, other scholars have explored the ubiquitous and fearful presence of monsters in folktales, mythologies, art, architecture, literature, and religion, drawing attention to the psychological and cultural deviances that these “unnatural” creatures embody. In physical and mental landscapes, these monstrous beings typically inhabit the borderlands, signifying the limits of human control and the terror that follows the experience of such limits. As Richard Kearney writes, “Unnatural, transgressive, obscene, contradictory, heterogeneous, mad. Monsters are what keep us awake at night and make us nervous during the day. And even when they claim as in *Monsters Inc.* that ‘they only scare because they care’, they still scare” (4).

[22] To constrain the role of monsters to the “shadow” side of the human imagination, however, truncates a fuller portrait of monster lore. Perhaps a fascination with terror and violence, or the Western tendency to depict evil as a heterogeneous monstrous counterpart to “pure” good has led to an overemphasis on the terrifying qualities of monsters.⁷ As the latter part of Kearney’s statement hints, however, monsters are not always simply antagonistic foes.

[23] As they flex their transgressive muscles, monsters move in and out of the spaces that are intended to confine them, revealing that the territory they inhabit need not only be a realm of terror – it can also be a realm of humor. Such humor can be found in the “sportive

grotesqueries” of satirical and decorative art during the Middle Ages (Harpham), or in more contemporary forms of what Timothy Beal refers to as “monster play” (191). In this playful, ambivalent mode, monsters can indeed be powerful allies of a different sort than their terrifying in-laws.

[24] The didactic and subversive function of “monstrous” humor has long been an important element in political protest, art, literature, and holiday drama.⁸ Perhaps no one has contributed more insights about regenerative humor than literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, whose exploration and celebration of “grotesque realism” in Rabelais’ novel *Gargantua and Pantegruel* remains a watershed in literary analysis.

[25] In Bakhtin’s estimation, the grotesque images, texts, and costumes used in the “carnival idiom” celebrated an “inside-out” world, one that reveled in a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” and “made a man renounce his official state as monk, cleric, scholar, and perceive the world in its laughing aspect” (11,13). As a noodly sideswipe against theories of intelligent design, the Flying Spaghetti Monster embodies such subversive humor. Like carnival celebrations of the Middle Ages, which often took place in tandem with revered Catholic holy days, the Flying Spaghetti Monster tinkers with religious mythology and language, appropriating symbols, digesting them, and spitting them back out as a challenge to literalistic dogma.

Folk Humor, Divine Monsters, and Competing Gospels

[26] In *On the Grotesque*, scholar Geoffrey Harpham notes that grotesqueries are recognizable by the manner in which they jumble together the formal, ontological, and logical categories of culture (xxi). As a deified, mobile mass of flying spaghetti, the Flying Spaghetti Monster certainly qualifies as grotesque according to Harpham's description, for as he puts it, "the essence of the grotesque" is "the sense that things that should be kept apart are fused together" (11).⁹ Such a confusion or violation of ontological categories offers an opportunity to ruminate on the function of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, which challenges the way in which science and religion (things that are assumed should be kept apart) may be fused together in the classroom.

[27] This transgressive behavior is particularly critical to the Flying Spaghetti Monster, which in Rabelaisian fashion uses the "low" to confound the "high," targeting society's authorities and elite figures with particular zeal. Contextualizing the use of grotesque imagery in the West, especially in the carnival folk culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods, Bakhtin underlines three connected themes that are particularly pertinent to Flying Spaghetti Monsterism: a) the unmasking function of humor and its challenge to dogmatic authority, b) the liberating and regenerative space of folk culture, and c) folk humor's physical emphasis on the "lower stratum" of the body (i.e., physiological features associated with birth and death, change and transformation, flesh and sexuality). The Flying Spaghetti Monster demonstrates numerous affinities with Bakhtin's description of the "carnival idiom," and Bakhtin's detailed analysis of the subversive function of regenerative laughter is a useful conceptual framework for understanding the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

[28] Carnival humor, according to Bakhtin, has its origins in antiquity and served to challenge prevailing religious dogma and authority figures by revealing the world in its “laughing aspect” (13). Historically, carnival festivals of the Middle Ages were celebrated alongside Catholic feast days, most notably in the “feasts of fools,” in which all manner of ecclesiastical reversals took place.¹⁰ In such feasts, a jester might be proclaimed king, a mock pope elected, clothes turned inside out, pants worn on one’s head, and devils allowed to cavort in the streets.

[29] Bakhtin notes that such feasts were often celebrated in tandem with readings from medieval parodical literature, which served a recreational function, freeing participants “from the oppression of such gloomy categories as ‘eternal,’ ‘immovable,’ ‘absolute,’ ‘unchangeable’ and instead [exposing] the gay and free laughing aspect of the world, with its unfinished and open character, with the joy of change and renewal” (83). This literature specialized in making light of scripture, prayers, and council decrees. The Flying Spaghetti Monster continues, in many ways, this tradition of sacred parody, even contributing its own alternative “Gospel” and coining noodly phrases like “pasta be upon him” (a spin off of the common Muslim expression, “peace be upon him,” in reference to Muhammad) and “RAmen” as an appropriate closing to prayers (instead of “amen”). According to Bakhtin, religious humor once allowed people to “play with terror and laugh at it” (91) and exemplified the “popular corrective of laughter applied to the narrow-minded seriousness of spiritual pretense” (22). Or as one of the Pastafarian faithful might put it, borrowing the lyrics of Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song”, this humor allows followers to “emancipate [themselves] from mental slavery” (*see fig. 3*).



Fig. 3. Emancipate Yourself from Mental Slavery..., from *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*. Ed. Bobby Henderson. 22 July 2006 <<http://www.venganza.org>>.

[30] Perhaps it is in its physical appearance that the Flying Spaghetti Monster most resists the seriousness and literalism of intelligent design, turning it on its head and holding up a fun-house mirror that is intended to display a shocking reflection.¹¹ The Flying Spaghetti Monster exhibits many of the qualities that Bakhtin describes as “grotesque realism,” which partook liberally from bodily images of “fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance” (19). The “essential principle” of grotesque realism is its degradation of all that is “high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” in favor of materiality, expressed particularly in “food, drink, digestion, and sexual life” (19-20). One can see such qualities in the Flying Spaghetti Monster, which “brings down to earth” common assumptions about what a deity should be. This digestive principle is expressed especially in relation to food, for the Flying Spaghetti Monster does not simply glorify eating: rather, it *is* a meal.

[31] What makes the Flying Spaghetti Monster an even more “tasty” deity – in the sense of heightening the contrast between it and its “rivals” – is its relationship to the God of the

Abrahamic faiths. One will generally not find material images of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam because such images are believed to be strictly forbidden (Deut. 5; Q. 4:48, 51:51).¹²

The traditional interpretation of this prohibition is that God is beyond representation, beyond material form, beyond physical description and earthly elements, and therefore, it is a categorical violation (and an act of blasphemy) to attempt to represent God in human terms.

[32] Contrary to such a prohibition, the Flying Spaghetti Monster not only deigns to represent deity, it represents the deity as a pasta dish. Perhaps the inscrutability of the divine is protected in this incarnation, but the violation of stereotypical divisions between “high” and “low” forms appropriate to deity are flaunted with considerable zest. Furthermore, digestion, and the sense that the internal is externally displayed, is exhibited by the intestine-like flagellum that comprise the Flying Spaghetti Monster’s body. It is quite literally a “brimming-over abundance” (to use Bakhtin’s phrase), always in motion.

[33] Finally, transgressive sexuality, common to the carnival idiom, is coyly implied by the “noodly appendage” that, if email testimonials are any indication, touches believers periodically, bestowing divine favor in the process (*see figs. 4, 5, 6*).

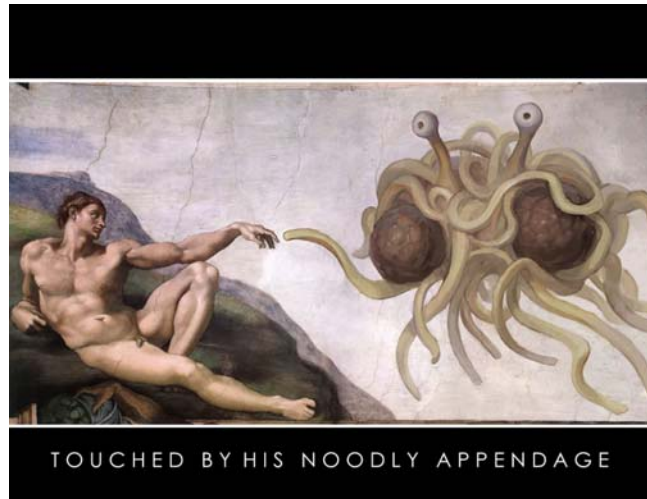


Fig. 4. Touched by His Noodly Appendage, from *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*. Ed. Bobby Henderson.

22 July 2006 <<http://www.venganza.org>>.



Fig. 5. Noodly Appendage? from *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*. Ed. Bobby Henderson. 22 July 2006

<<http://www.venganza.org>>.



Fig. 6. Intelligent Design with Balls, from *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*. Ed. Bobby Henderson. 22 July 2006 <<http://www.venganza.org>>.

[34] In these numerous ways, the Flying Spaghetti Monster violates the conventions of deity and religious propriety. But the laughs are not meant to be (always) cheap. Beneath what is becoming an elaborate mythos, the “monstrous humor” of the Flying Spaghetti Monster serves as a pointed commentary on the culture war between representatives of religion and science.

[35] In this sense, the Flying Spaghetti Monster functions as a potentially powerful didactic device, and its “good news” is teaching people to distinguish clearly between different elements of social reality and encouraging reflection upon certain types of religious tenets.¹³ It might be said that Bobby Henderson created a monster to deal with the “monster” of intelligent design, which he views as an inappropriate muddle of science and religion.¹⁴

[36] Perhaps, in this role, the Flying Spaghetti Monster plays a role not unlike God’s Leviathan in the biblical book of Job (Job 41-42:6), with the difference that the Flying Spaghetti Monster

uses humor instead of terror to teach its lesson. Timothy Beal, who offers an excellent examination of the Jobian narrative in *Religion and its Monsters*, remarks that God “out-monsters Job” (48), pressing Job beyond conventional theological understandings through the rhetorical shock effect of Leviathan’s monstrosity.¹⁵ Borrowing Beal’s phraseology, it is possible that the intended effect of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is to “out-monster” intelligent design by pushing the boundaries of absurdity to their limits.

[37] This monster mimesis that the Flying Spaghetti Monster utilizes calls attention to at least two items: 1) that intelligent design is a theory attributable to the human imagination, and thus a “monster,” mixing religion (understood as supernaturally unverifiable) and science (understood as empirically verifiable) in an “unnatural” or “unwholesome” manner; and 2) the Flying Spaghetti Monster, through humorous absurdity, exposes such nonsense, unmasking the claims of those who support intelligent design as comparable to a contrived myth based on an aerial tangle of pasta. Like Leviathan, then, the Flying Spaghetti Monster serves a didactic function, using monstrous extremity to expose the inadequacy of certain religious conventions.¹⁶

[38] Part of the parody of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is that its devotees have petitioned the Kansas school board (among others) to allow for its inclusion in public school curriculum. After all, as the logic of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster would have it, if the Judeo-Christian creation narrative is going to be taught as an alternate theory to evolution, then the Flying Spaghetti Monster’s creative exploits should be included as well. As Henderson speculates in his open letter to the Kansas School Board,

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, and one third time for logical conjecture based on overwhelming observable evidence (online at <http://www.venganza.org>; accessed 30 June 2006).

The outcome – if such a course of action were taken seriously – is obviously absurd: if the Flying Spaghetti Monster were included in the school curriculum, all religious “alternatives” would have to be included as well for the sake of parity, presumably from as many religions as possible. Reading between the lines, with the assumption that this implausible classroom scenario is not meant to be taken in earnest, what *is* meant to be taken seriously is that science (“logical conjecture based on overwhelming evidence,” in Henderson’s words) should not have to compete with religious myth in the classroom.

[39] As with monsters in general, the Flying Spaghetti Monster offers more than meets the eye, for if its primary role is playfully satirizing a particular type of religious narrative, it also beckons people to think more deeply about the relationship between religion and science. Thus, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and its offspring of marketable paraphernalia (e.g., coffee mugs, T-shirts, bumper emblems), serve a pedagogical role, calling for reflection upon the contested relationship between science and religion in American civil life. True to the etymological roots of the word *monster*, the Flying Spaghetti Monster “reveals” and “warns” against populating educational curriculum with stories that may lead students away from empirically verifiable evidence. Part of the humor of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, then, is that it is intended to be taken as seriously as the “myths” that it mimics: that is, not at all. In the end, this makes the Flying Spaghetti Monster a rival only to a particular variety of biblical literalism, not to science.

Concluding Remarks: Contesting Nature Narratives

[40] Through mimesis, the Flying Spaghetti Monster subverts the religious narrative offered by proponents of intelligent design, offering an additional narrative of its own, one that is plainly meant to point out the dangers of taking certain cosmological myths literally (or at least literally enough to teach them as scientifically credible). In a carnivalesque fashion, the Flying Spaghetti Monster elevates the low (the bodily, the material, the inorganic) to bring down the high (the sacred, the religiously dogmatic, the culturally authoritative). And like historical forms of popular subversion, the Flying Spaghetti Monster plays its monstrous role well, mixing and bending physical and narrative categories in order to highlight the absurdity of certain cultural conventions. Bakhtin would see such humor as performing a regenerative function, a democratic festival that laughs in the face of authority (in this case, the forces represented by the Kansas school board), if only for a moment.¹⁷

[41] Indeed, the Flying Spaghetti Monster has garnered a great deal of attention, with many Pastafarians “joining the church” by sharing their experiences on the website, producing artwork, or posting promotional flyers in their communities.¹⁸ (*see figs. 7 and 8*)



Figs. 7 and 8. Pastafarian Solidarity, from *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*. Ed. Bobby Henderson.

22 July 2006 <<http://www.venganza.org>>.

Newspapers, radio programs, and even popular scientific magazines and journals have also taken notice of the Flying Spaghetti Monster's exploits.¹⁹ *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* has further added to the Flying Spaghetti Monster myth, and a cottage industry of icons, T-shirts, and coffee mugs, among other fashionable knick-knacks, attests to the Flying Spaghetti Monster's continued popularity among Pastafarians of all stripes. This noodly monster has clearly struck a chord, filling a popular niche and focusing the energies of those who remain frustrated with religious narratives that receive serious consideration as alternatives to scientific theories.

[42] As a parody of religious cosmological narratives (and possibly religion in general), however, the Flying Spaghetti Monster may contribute to an unhelpful dualism between religion and science. Both evolutionary theory and intelligent design can be seen, in their different ways, as giving meaning and order to the cosmos by appealing to an overarching explanatory framework. But contrary to the suggestions of intelligent design proponents, evolutionary theory need not inevitably lead scientists (or anyone else) to view the universe as comprised of disenchanted bits of matter. Increasingly, scientists appeal to language of the sacred to describe their emotive connections to the earth and its biodiversity (Takacs). And there have always been religious adherents who have looked to the natural world for evidence of the divine.

[43] In this respect, there remains a good deal of room for overlap between scientific observation and religious motivation. However, an important question remains as to whether

such views are extraneous to classes devoted to describing observable natural processes. In this respect, the “theory” of intelligent design – as the Kansas school board controversy indicates – is often promoted as a rival to evolutionary theory, and, in this role, becomes an ideological tool to promote a particular system of belief more than a necessary means of explanatory power.

Flying Spaghetti Monsterism implicitly and explicitly targets intelligent design as an inadequate, imaginary narrative, similar to the circular logic of its own mythos.²⁰ The Flying Spaghetti Monster thus points to the absurdity of smuggling such religious views into the science curriculum under the guise of an alternative theory.

[44] It is possible that the satirical contributions of the Flying Spaghetti Monster to the evolutionary debate may generate greater opposition between those who already caricature their opponents, furthering unhelpful dichotomies instead of bridging gaps. Yet at the same time, the Flying Spaghetti Monster remains an excellent example of how humor, especially in its monstrous incarnations, can not only entertain but also awaken others to how cultural categories are and continue to be constructed. In the contested realm of public education, where so many offer such moral certitude while the controversy remains unresolved, more people may be tempted to ask: What Would the Flying Spaghetti Monster Do?



Fig. 9. WWFSMD? from *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*. Ed. Bobby Henderson. 22 July 2006

<<http://www.venganza.org>>.

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¹ Intelligent design, broadly speaking, is part of a larger movement commonly referred to as “creation science.” Creation science emerged as a branch of a Christian-oriented “creationism” movement that was itself spawned in the wash of the Enlightenment, when humans began to grow increasingly confident in their ability to describe the world in naturalistic terms. Some, in this era of confidence in human endeavor, struggled to maintain a place for a Creator in the philosophy of nature (for a brief description of the rise of creationism (Croce 435-437). In the 1960s, certain members of this movement tired of combating science head-on, and devised an alternative “science” which ignored large portions of Darwinian theory. Intelligent design was intended to obscure the exclusivity of a Christian (but not monotheistic) creator by referring to this divine force in a more abstract manner and claiming that something akin to an intelligent being must be responsible for the “irreducible complexity” (Behe) of the natural world. Of course, not all Christians are creation scientists or creationists, and not all creation scientists seek to push intelligent design theories in public schools.

² The case was eventually overturned by the Tennessee Supreme Court in 1927, but only because law required any fine over \$50 to be levied by a jury (Wexler 447). The Supreme Court did not, however, rule that the Tennessee law was unconstitutional, leaving it on the books for another forty years.

³ Scott, and most other scientists, trace the emergence of intelligent design to creation science or creationism movements. But the movement is by no means monolithic. However, two notions,

Behe's notion of "irreducible complexity" grounded in molecular biological claims and William Dembski's "design inference" (1998), seem to run across the board (Scott: 815). Both have been well-answered by the scientific community, though the scientific community and the general public, as Scott noted, have widely divergent sets of beliefs.

⁴ There has been, since the 1960s, a general realization that values inhere even in ostensibly value-neutral scientific methodologies. According to some philosophers, metaphysical (that is to say, super-naturalistic) causation is assumed even in the most materialistic of philosophies: a claim for a strong reductionist materialist program is, after all, ultimately a faith claim of sorts (Midgley 92-110). Others have built on such a recognition, and some scientists have openly embraced and advocated spiritualities that describe the natural world in sacred terms (Takacs). The point here is that most scientists are not the dogmatic, red-in-tooth-and-claw atheists that some intelligent design proponents imagine them to be.

⁵ It may come as little surprise to those who are familiar with nineteenth and twentieth-century monster literature and film that scientific "error" would create a monster. For example, in his examination of modern monsters and their relationship to "bad" science (i.e., scientific experimentation used for nefarious or egoistic purposes such as in the novel *Frankenstein* or the film *Jurassic Park*), Gilmore asserts that "monsters still reflect, embody, and thrive on human failings," serving as moral enforcers by punishing human error (73). Beal also analyzes the prevalence of "ecomonsters" in films like *Godzilla* (159-171), which challenge human presumption (even if they are "tamed" by the film's end). This bears an interesting parallel with the FSM, for though the FSM doesn't punish humans in cinematically violent ways, it could be said that the FSM arises in direct response to "bad" science, humorously directing attention to the "monstrous" amalgamation of biblical literalism with empirical data.

⁶ This emphasis often relies, at least in part, upon Rudolph Otto's classic description of the holy as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (see particularly Gilmore 176; Beal 7-8, 53-54; Kearney 35), a numinous force that simultaneously terrifies and lures those who encounter it (Otto).

⁷ Gilmore points to this stark duality in his sampling of Western monsters, and, following Freud's lead, in his discussion of psychological monsters embedded within the "super-id" (193-194; cf. Kearney 72-75). However, though this may be a dominant motif in Middle Eastern cosmological narratives, apocalyptic literature, and Christian morality parables of the Middle Ages, particularly eschatological ones, a wide variety of folk literature reveals a much more ambiguous (and liberating) role for monsters, a point that Bakhtin makes repeatedly.

⁸ One may consider the role of the trickster figure in various cultures, a transgressive, often humorous, being that entertains and instructs simultaneously. Likewise, in the West, Halloween (Samhain) and Mardi Gras are two holidays that retain some of their monster "tricks" and humor. Protests and parades also often release monsters to roam the streets, and monster humor is often used as a subversive tool to bring attention to various causes (for how this has been employed in anarchist protests (Graeber 208-209).

One notable example of "monster play" that Beal mentions is the college group Campus Crusade of Cthulhu (188-192), a humorous offspring of H.P. Lovecraft's "Cthulu Mythos", which uses an evangelical idiom to satirize the Christian evangelical Campus Crusade for Christ. An internet site devoted to the Campus Crusade for Cthulhu proclaims: "Bored by an ordinary, nothing life? Searching for excitement, power? Seeking a higher cause, one worthy of your very life? The Campus Crusade for Cthulhu offers all this, AND MORE ... You will learn to yearn for the soft squeezing caress of undulating tentacles. Or you will be eternally sorry that you did not" (quoted in Beal 2003: 188). One can only speculate as to whether the presence of

“undulating tentacles” in the Cthulhu mythos and the noodliness of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is only an eerie coincidence. Whatever the case, it is clear that both the Flying Spaghetti Monster and the Campus Crusade of Cthulhu are cut from the same cloth, in which “the performance of monstrosity becomes a kind of self-subverting, socially transgressive play whose superficiality and cheekiness masks a deeper sense of irony” (Beal 188).

⁹ Harpham examines several images of religious satire that are instructive in regards to the Flying Spaghetti Monster. As he comments, “Most grotesques are marked by such an affinity/antagonism, by the co-presence of the normative, fully formed, ‘high’ or ideal, and the abnormal, unformed, degenerate, ‘low’ or material” (9). The relative formlessness of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and its combination of “high” (deity) and “low” (pasta, meatballs, snail) elements reflect this morphological *mélange*.

¹⁰ The “feasts of fools” were parallel ritualized celebrations that complemented the official rites of Catholic feast days, including St. Stephen’s, the feast of the Holy Innocents, Epiphany, and St. John’s (Bakhtin 74). Such festivities were viewed as a positive way to “vent,” an affirmation of human folly offsetting somber pieties and hierarchically-arranged rites.

¹¹ Perhaps it is unsurprising that Flying Spaghetti Monsterism has its origins in cyberspace, for the Internet acts as a democratic zone not unlike the carnival marketplace of the Middle Ages. Largely unregulated, open to all with access to a computer, the worldwide Web offers equal opportunity to those who wish to challenge cultural conventions. Bakhtin’s comments on the forms of communication such a free space engenders seem apropos in this context: “This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in every day life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those

who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times” (10).

¹² There are, of course, exceptions to this command, more so in Christianity than the other two Abrahamic faiths, for some Christian artists have interpreted the prohibition of images as being limited to idols (i.e., material depictions of other deities that rival God). Furthermore, though there have always been iconoclastic streams with Christianity, the creedal affirmation that Jesus is God incarnate has ameliorated (or made ambiguous) the prohibition of divine images.

¹³ Anthropologists have been particularly adept at pointing out the social function of ritual transgression, detailing how liminal states (Turner) and even liminal animals (e.g., see discussion of the pangolin in Douglas) can serve to expose the arbitrary quality of structural categories that are otherwise taken for granted in society. By passing through such liminal periods or by meditating upon liminal symbols, social conventions are revealed as socially constructed. In other words, by mixing and playing with categories that are commonly kept separate according to particularized cultural conventions, a cultural group can force its people to stop and take notice. Thus, monsters can serve a productive, even regenerative function, alerting those who pay attention to them to the ever-shifting borders of social convention (Gilmore [156-57] and Harpham [43] emphasize this, drawing upon Turner’s work).

¹⁴ As Henderson noted in an interview with *USA Today*, “I don’t have any problem with religion, but it is not science” (Vergano).

¹⁵ Job, according to the biblical narrative, had his world thrown into chaos when God removed the protecting “hedge” from around him. After a series of extreme psychological and physical trials, and a series of explanations from his friends that ring shallow, Job confronts God directly. God answers chaos with chaos, and questions with questions, calling particularly upon Leviathan

to champion God's self-revelation. In the end Job is left dumb before God, and it is a monster (Leviathan) that enables him to see more clearly the mystery of God's ways. Job expresses his epiphany of the transcendent God in the following way: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). It is fascinating that it takes the disclosure of Leviathan for Job to "see" God.

¹⁶ Obviously, the lesson the Leviathan and the Flying Spaghetti Monster "teach" are not equal – not even close. The former reveals the unfathomable mystery of God; the latter, the flawed imagination of humans. The point here is that both monsters are called upon to demonstrate the inadequacy of explaining God as a being that is a product of human comprehension.

¹⁷ Politicians have also been lampooned on the website, including President George W. Bush, who is listed among those "endorsing" Flying Spaghetti Monsterism, since he once remarked in response to a question about whether or not intelligent design should be taught in public schools, "I think that part of education is to expose people to different schools of thought. You're asking me whether or not people ought to be exposed to different ideas, the answer is yes." Available at <http://www.venganza.org/>, accessed 6 July 2006.

¹⁸ The web-based "Church of Reality" (http://www.churchofreality.org/wisdom/flying_spaghetti_monster/) has even made the Flying Spaghetti Monster its "official fictional deity."

¹⁹ The *Science Creative Quarterly* has been the most involved, publishing whimsical theories about Flying Spaghetti Monsterism, but articles and references to the Flying Spaghetti Monster have appeared in diverse publications, including *Science*, *Scientific American*, *USA Today*, and *Science and Theology News*, not to mention numerous newspaper editorials.

²⁰ In a contest sponsored by the *Science Creative Quarterly*, a prize of \$100 worth of Ramen noodles was offered for “proof” of the Flying Spaghetti Monster’s existence, which elicited mathematical, philosophical, and teleological solutions, as well as an ontological proof based on the famous eleventh-century theological conjectures of St. Anselm.

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