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Seeing Through the Invisible Pink Unicorn

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Abstract

This paper explores the quasi-religious aspects of the Invisible Pink Unicorn (IPU), an internet based spoof of religion. IPU message boards situate a moral orientation in an ongoing interactional process that sacralizes parody and an idealized form of "free thinking." We employ content analysis and grounded theory to argue that IPU writers' parody of religion serves as a ritual act and conclude our discussion by considering the implications of the findings for the literature on ritual.

Introduction: The Invisible Pink Unicorn

[1] The Invisible Pink Unicorn (IPU) is an imaginary creature devised as a means of arguing against literalist religious beliefs.[1] It is similar to other philosophical constructs that dramatize the tautologies and *argumentum ad verecundiam* (i.e., "appeal to questionable authority") that sometimes inhere in religious thought, such as Carl Sagan's Invisible Dragon and the Celestial Teapot of Bertrand Russell. A more direct inspiration may have been the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) created by Bobby Henderson as part of his political activism against the teaching of creationism.

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[1] We recommend that readers unfamiliar with the Invisible Pink Unicorn visit a few related websites before reading this paper. It is easy to find one of the "official" sites, and the Wikipedia entry makes a good starting point.

[2] Many IPU posts are sophisticated. Beginning with the name "Invisible Pink Unicorn," one finds a clever play on the paradoxical nature of most, if not all, religious belief systems – the IPU is both pink *and* invisible, which ushers in rich parodies of religious apologetics based on mystification and evasion. The IPU has also been jokingly cited as the cause of certain "miraculous" events, especially the mysterious disappearance of socks in laundromats. Through the gradual, collaborative accretion of IPU writings, posters (people who post on IPU message boards) have created a complex system of meanings – an IPU "lore," for lack of a better term – that further parodies the development of theological constructs, with obvious implications for sacralization and religious authority.[2] For instance, some community members proscribe following all references to the IPU with BHHH, short for "bless her holy hooves," a play on the routinization of honorifics associated with religion and social elites.

[3] The IPU exists almost entirely on the internet, although the IPU symbol sometimes appears as graffiti or in tattoos. It qualifies as a "cyber-religion," as Hojsgaard defines the term. Unlike the other imaginary creatures used in arguments against religious beliefs, from the start the IPU has been more parody than philosophical instrument. It is a joke, a plaything. IPU posters revel in lampooning religious language, scripture, unsubstantiated beliefs, religious (or any) authority, and self righteousness. The following post, an explanation for why there are more "sightings" of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM), is a typical example of IPU community members' playfulness and bawdy humor:

> Well, there are more sightings of the FSM, but that's just because he isn't invisible. We'll never know if there are sightings of the IPU because she is invisible. How do we know that the FSM and the IPU don't actually get along and aren't great buddies, maybe even have casual sex? I mean, the FSM does have all those noodly appendages, and the IPU does have that horn ;) (poster known as "evilatheistconquerer").

[4] The first known reference to the IPU was in an alt.atheist.net posting from July 18, 1990. However, the author of that post, Scott Gibson, appears to be using a term already in existence. According to the BBC website, usenet contributors at the University of Iowa in the mid 1990s were responsible for popularizing the IPU.

[5] Since then, the IPU has grown in popularity. There are several dedicated IPU websites, she is still regularly mentioned in New Atheist postings, and the symbol of the IPU has been taken by some as the symbol of Atheism. Although the IPU seems to have been invented merely as a device in logical argumentation, the attractiveness of the IPU as a parody of religion has resulted in an accretion of discourse – a slow building up of the parody – such that IPU is now sufficiently developed to serve as the quasi-religious basis of a very vaguely defined virtual community. This is an interesting case in that IPU contributors seem to be

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[2] The installation "Proposition Player" by artist Matthew Ritchie makes for an interesting analogy. This work artistically renders the notion that with sufficient complexity and enough coincidences, the emergence of meaning is inevitable – it is generated by the system itself. The increasing complexity of IPU information has similarly led to the emergence of a *system* of lore, with all its attending nuances and connecting threads. This is, needless to say, part of the fun.

involved simultaneously in what Helland calls "religion online" (i.e., the presentation of information about a religion, such as its history and beliefs) and "online religion" (i.e., websites that involve practice in some way). Helland conceives these terms as part of a continuum, but the IPU seems to fit on both ends equally. We will show how participation in the ongoing joke of the IPU serves as a ritual means to group identity.

Research Methods

[6] Because the IPU is an internet phenomenon, we began with Google searches to locate relevant websites. We collected all related discussions from the alt.atheist discussion board and from usenet contributors from the University of Iowa. The collected texts were input into a content analysis software program (Weft). The data were coded at several levels, with special reference to types and references of humor and parody, such as humorous shifts between the "high" language of religious scripture and everyday slang, the use of what kindergarten teachers call bedroom and bathroom words, as well as obviously silly and illogical statements gussied up with logical, rhetorical, or philosophical jargon.

[7] The choice of IPU over some of the other New Atheist parodies is justified in that there is a sufficient level of discourse, yet the IPU materials are small enough that it is possible to visit virtually all of the relevant sites. Another reason is that the IPU developed as an insider's game on the alt.atheist discussion board, thus suggesting a loosely defined community that was in on the joke. The Flying Spaghetti Monster, by contrast, was invented specifically as part of a political argument against a Kansas School Board decision on the teaching of intelligent design. There has developed a following of sorts around the FSM too (see Cowan), however, that group is more directly linked to the ongoing imbroglios over Darwin and creationism.

[8] Our method of analysis is Glaserian grounded theory (Glaser; Glaser and Strauss) in the sense that the initial study of collected materials was inductive, with subsequent analysis proceeding deductively – that is to say, as constant comparison in the significant phase to test emerging conceptualizations. The goal throughout was to arrive at a point of theoretical saturation, in which new findings do not lead to new understandings.

[9] In regard to this paper, the methods and procedures of content analysis, while valuable, led to mostly tangential findings. What most interests us about IPU posts is the highly redundant nature of the humor. In ritual acts, redundancy is expected to the extent that the use of content analysis in the study of ritual is problematic because repeated behavior is itself meaningful. In our case, every post that contributed to the rolling joke that is the IPU employed the same style of humor, which naturally complicates comparative analysis. Hence, in this paper the specific findings of content analysis – the counts of this or that element in the postings – take a back seat to our grounded theory approach of developing conceptions of what community members are up to and then testing our conceptions deductively in the face of subsequent data analysis.

[10] Wherever possible, we collected the epigraphs of posters. Many of these serve as iconic expressions of the value orientations held by the posters. There were not enough epigraphs and their contents were too miniscule to necessitate formal content analysis, but, as we will see, taken together with the contents of the posts themselves, these epigraphs support

"loud" expressions of their authors' obvious disdain for any beliefs that cannot be empirically supported.

A Ritual Process among IPU Posters

[11] It is notable that what social connection exists among IPU posters comes entirely via the repeated process of posting comments of a certain sort – it is a rolling joke. Beyond the mere repetition, those "in on the joke" follow a set of conventions in their humor and repeatedly express a shared set of values. This repeated presentation of normative comments serves a symbolic function; it creates, affirms, and maintains a boundary that separates who is in the group from those outside. At the very least, this process meets Asad's minimum standard for defining a behavior as ritual: it is a symbolic activity separate from the instrumental behavior of the workaday world (55; on internet communication as ritual, see Brignall and Van Valey; Cowan).

[12] Repeated posts by different IPU members fosters the development of a sense of community, or what Victor Turner famously called *communitas*, albeit in a virtual context (see Helland). But while Turner's interest in the ritual process stressed the use of ecstatic ritual as an occasional release from the tiresome roles and obligations of hierarchical social structures, IPU posters have nothing in the way of structure beyond what they create through their posts. Still, terms like *communitas* and community apply here in the sense of a shared social solidarity or a uniting ideology that exists in the absence of any immediate social institutions (beyond what is required for internet access) (Etzioni and Etzioni).

[13] Many IPU posters self-identify as atheists or "New Atheists," and this raises the question of how the IPU should be seen in relation to that group. We should not, however, treat the atheism underlying the IPU ethic necessarily as a church or religion of which IPU boggers are merely a part. As one poster puts it,

> A "Church of Atheism"? So every fundie can tell us that atheism really *is* a religion? No thanks. If we should do something like that, it should be the "Church of the Invisible Pink Unicorn." Every net-atheist knows what it stands for, but we don't lose our "atheism isn't a belief, but a lack thereof." Plus, having [a] horse as god is soooo much more fun :-) (poster known as Morgan).

[14] In this post, the author, "Morgan," inadvertently displays his/her conception of religion. The author writes that establishing a church would give every "fundie" (short for fundamentalist) the opportunity to call atheism a religion. The author's understanding of religion is revealing. If the creation of a church is all that it will take for atheism to be considered a religion, this suggests that there is already a belief system in place; a church would be the final step.

[15] Another interesting aspect of this post is the author's contention that a church of the IPU would be a more feasible option. For this author, the IPU appears to be a symbol of atheism in general; a symbol that all "net-atheists" know the meaning of. The suggestion of a church based on a deliberately silly parody strikes the poster as a defensive tactic against counterclaims of atheism being merely a different belief system. Here, as in almost every IPU post, religion is conceived as primarily a matter of belief, not of practice. It is also worth

mentioning the post's humor, the most consistent characteristic of IPU postings. The seriousness of the post is given a comical edge by the humorous closing sentence that having a horse as a god would be more fun than having a church of atheism. Fun matters, and it matters a lot for these posters.

[16] The IPU phenomenon is difficult to categorize on the basis of existing conceptions of ritual and religion. Geertz's advice to analyze first the meanings inherent in a religion's symbols and then to relate these meanings to structural and psychological processes seems sensible enough, but as Asad points out, it is impossible to separate practice from meaning. As he puts it, ". . . different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any representation) acquire their identity and their truthfulness" (53). It is also difficult to conceive how to analyze any connection to structural and psychological process given that the IPU exists only in a virtual context.

[17] IPU posters may be interacting or experimenting with different identities, as is common in online communication (Turkle; Brignall and Van Valey; Cowan) or deliberately displaying group norm violations that would be impolite or alienating in everyday interaction (Brignall and Van Valey). However, in the case of the IPU, the ethos suggested by offhand comments and seen in posters' epigraphs appears in contrast to the overt presentation of a playful, detached manner. There is a serious side to these postings and there is no indication of identity exploration or norm violation as a central rubric of the interaction.

[18] Randall Collins has described joking and kidding behavior as a form of ritual. Beyond the formalized, repeated nature of telling and responding to jokes, there is also the phenomenon of laughing, which involves rhythmic convulsions, the shared timing of which may create a sense of connection between those taking part. Naturally, this rhythmic effect does not exist in a virtual context. Nonetheless, the humor, and especially the parodies of religious honorifics and formal language used by IPU posters are easily conceived of as ritual. Present in this community are many ingredients of interaction ritual, especially since the postings all share the same *form* of parody.

[19] The advice of Catherine Bell to avoid definitional quagmires by analyzing the degree of formalization, rather than attempt to categorize "ritual," is particularly apt in regard to routinized behaviors in a virtual context. Her approach is quite revolutionary: rather than hold to loosely defined "family resemblances" or some fuzzy logic behind categories, she (and later, Collins) begins with the assumption that there are formal aspects to all non-random human behavior. The valid research question concerns the *degree* to which the behavior has been formalized and "encoded" (Rappaport) previous to the encounter.

[20] One question is whether IPU posters' behavior is better described as "festive" than "ritual." Social scientists usually distinguish rituals and festivities by linking the former with religion and meaning, the latter with recreation. But, as Barbara Ehrenreich points out, this may not always make sense to the participants. In regard to IPU writings, the relentless assertion of the writers' values in these postings, together with the highly redundant style of parody, forces us to consider meaning and ritual together. Surprisingly, whereas the social scientist's common distinction between rituals and festivities is likely to appeal to IPU posters, who clearly do not see their behavior as overtly "religious," analysts studying the IPU phenomenon have no intrinsic justification for this distinction.

[21] It is possible to treat the IPU as a quasi-religious phenomenon[3] or as a form of "cultural religion" (Demerath 2000, 2001). These concepts both suggest some form of religious practice without any or much emphasis on beliefs, such as people commonly self-designating as "Christian" in Northern Europe despite their extremely low levels of literal beliefs (Zuckerman). Religion often (not always) involves belief, yet religious practice involves something more: collective and even individual religious practices (rituals, in other words) that can and usually do influence participants' culture and behavior, and thus engender emotions, create social solidarity, reinforce existing beliefs, and/or inform morally-directed behavior (Wuthnow; Rappaport; Smith; Collins; Warner; Abel).

[22] As Christian Smith argues, any discussion of culture and action requires some account of agency and of human motivations. Shared moods and motivations may arise from cultural and religious practices, as Geertz suggested. Yet Geertz's approach sidesteps the problem of how social groups settle upon certain moods and motivations in the first place, which ushers in the issue of power (Asad). Yet, ritual can be conceived as a collective or organic process in which individuals may organize their collective actions in the absence of clear sources of political or cultural power. An ethos can serve as the basis of an orienting group identity; as Karen Cerulo puts it, ". . . collective agency is enacted in a moral space" (393).

[23] Recent theoretical statements on ritual suggest a central role for ritual in relation to agency. For instance, both Collins and Rappaport consider affect and social authority in relation to ritual; both provide a ritual basis for the organization of individual motivations. Collins conceives human motivations following upon the energizing emotions people experience in successful rituals, whereas Rappaport treats ritual as a means of transforming abstract systems of relationships, roles, and obligations into something that is publicly recognizable and to some extent enforceable, as through ceremonies. Rather than treating power as the force that shapes rituals to meet the needs of an elite, power can be conceived as contingent upon successful rituals that establish hierarchies.

[24] The issue of power is particularly complex in the context of internet interactions, given the absence of controlling forces that typifies internet interactions. In this context, rituals that orient individuals to this or that ethos may best be described as promoting moods and motivations. But virtual interactions do not imply a political vacuum. Certainly, IPU posters' value judgments occur in the context of a non-virtual world in which religion has real political consequences. Hence, for instance, IPU posters' attack on unsubstantiated belief is quite naturally relevant to the political machinations between religious conservatives and people espousing a secular liberal-democratic orientation. As Smith argues, among human beings, morals and beliefs matter and are at the core of constructed identities that have real world applications. The question that remains is what rituals have to do with all of this, and how might rituals function when they are almost entirely limited to a virtual context, in which there is no physical co-presence among interactants (Collins' "mutual entrainment"),

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[3] Definitions of "religious" are notoriously problematic (see, especially, Asad), and the situation is even worse for "quasi-religious." For our purposes, we will treat religion in mostly Durkheimian terms as involving sets of beliefs and practices relative to a group's shared sense of what is and is not sacred. We will use the term quasi-religious quite loosely in reference to beliefs and practices that are not typically considered religious, including sporting events, artistic and cultural activities, and IPU writings.

no immediate connection to social or economic institutions (Turner), no fixed roles (Rappaport), no shared affective response (Collins), and no ecstatic release through shared participation in repetitive rhythmic movements of some sort (McNeill; Warner; Ehrenreich) – in other words, where there is little (beyond formalism and repetitiveness) of what previous authors have taken for granted in their conceptions of ritual?

The IPU as Quasi-Religious Discourse

[25] The IPU is clearly a symbol, an iconic presentation. Durkheim famously argued in his "God is society" thesis that supernatural deities represent the very social community of the deity's followers, thus embodying the functional prerequisites of its followers. But if people use ritual and religion to regulate themselves, the process is not obvious for disconnected IPU posters, for whom any immediate functional utility seems out of the question.

[26] But suppose we take the IPU as a representation of something else, something social. What would that something be? If the IPU has a referent, a good place to look for it would be in the value orientations of the group that produces the "sacred texts" of the IPU canon. "Community" may at first seem too strong a word for the scattered individuals who have created the IPU, although, as Cowan argues, community is not a strictly binary term – it is not possible to say that a community either exists or does not. For instance, he discusses the interesting case of Pagan discussion forums that claim to be communities despite having just a few posts per month or there being just a few individuals who post most or all of the messages. Yet, these sporadic posts may nonetheless relate to offline identity affiliations of one sort or another that easily qualify as communities. We suggest that IPU posters relate to a community in several important ways.

[27] First, as a parody, the IPU writers attain community by being "in on the joke." That is not just to say they share jokes – they also share a style of humor: witty and ribald religious parody. IPU writers employ religious sounding language as a means of parodying the formalized presentation of religious worship. Consider, for instance, how the following passage links the formal sounding phrase "go forth" with impertinent "bathroom and bedroom words":

> "I must object to the Pink Unicorn being labeled Invisible. It's not to me. I walk and talk with the Pink Unicorn every day. In troubling situations I ask myself, "What would the Pink Unicorn do?"

> The answer varies. Sometimes it says, "Go forth and eat clover grass." Sometimes it says, "Go forth and eat cowslip." You might think I'm crazy but it worked. It helped my irritable bowel syndrome.

> Magnificent.

> It also helps me find virgins. Always a good thing" (poster known as Critical Thinker).

[28] The styles of humor employed in IPU "scripture" are highly redundant. One could say that it is the same joke over and over: language that is "high" or serious in tone is brought jarringly together with such "low-brow" elements as sexuality, bodily functions, and immorality. This eclecticism is by no means accidental, nor is it merely parody. In their clever

use of language, IPU posters engage in a process of de-sacralization by linking the accoutrements of religious faith to silliness.

[29] Yet to call this de-sacralization is misleading because, in an abstract yet very real sense, this process is clearly associated with strongly held values. The IPU writers' high valuation placed upon reason, empirically verifiable findings, creativity, and wit is celebrated in precisely the same ritual forms they themselves mock. However, it is not the rituals they creatively appropriate and rework that serve as the rituals of a virtual community. Rather, parody itself is for these writers a ritual act. The object of their devotionals is not a god, and they together appear decidedly anti-religious. Yet they employ a ritual process to support a value system – a process Durkheim, at least, conceived as religion.

Unceremonious Ceremonies? Eating the IPU

[30] The rough and tumble humor of the IPU group is just as easily transferred to the goddess herself. In one exchange, the question of whether the IPU might become visible when cooked led to a sideline discussion over what wine one would serve with roast IPU. Likewise, even the logic and style of the IPU have been parodied. Other creatures have been offered as alternatives, such as the Inaudible Cacophonous Manticore and the Intactile Fuzzy Jackalope – creatures which also have three-part names and inherent paradoxes (whereas the IPU is both pink and invisible, the Manticore is inaudible yet cacophonous, the Jackalope both fuzzy and intactile).

[31] Jokes at the IPU's expense highlight a value orientation strongly shared by IPU community members: nothing is to be taken as special or sacred. Yet this process nonetheless valorizes ideals of rationality[4] and critical thought as something apart from the ordinary and mundane. That is to say, there exists, in Goffman's phrase, a "small patrimony of sacredness" (63). Rationality is the one thing that holds true after the gaffs of religious thinkers are demonstrated. It is a kind of meta-sacred, above and beyond what is taken to be the unenlightened sacralization processes of ordinary religions. Because the IPU is a parody of religion, mainly of the Judeo-Christian tradition, one can claim that the value of parody is endemic to the IPU posters. Parody serves as a rite; it is a liturgy of critical thought.

[32] Parody can serve as a crude means to a limited group cohesion. Jokes at the expense of religious people define a community of others: non-religious people able to cleverly spoof religion. The participants are speaking with other members of the same group, they focus their attention upon a shared object or activity (Collins). For example, a post on the alt.atheist discussion board describes one member's experience of a "miracle" performed by the Invisible Pink Unicorn. The member closed the post by asking others to share experiences where they were affected by an IPU miracle. Twenty people responded to this topic by disclosing stories of how they too had witnessed an IPU miracle, all presented in more or less the same style of wit and humor. This form of participation serves as an interaction ritual, in which participants' group identity is constructed through a process that involves the joint creation of shared symbols (Collins).

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[4] We use the term rationality not in the Weberian sense, but merely as employed among IPU posters as a synonym for "reasonable."

[33] Despite all the fun and creativity, IPU posters are not innocent of the machinations of denigration associated with power struggle; they systematically make light of opposing religious groups and beliefs as a means of advancing their shared ideology. While rituals are an effective means to group cohesion, another is the definition of a common enemy, in this case "fundies." In sharing their parodies of religious life, IPU posters express a common morality; the group's "rightness" is defended against its opponents through the creation of negative images, which have been shown to increase group solidarity (Collins; Rappaport).

Epigraphs

[34] Because IPU posts mostly concern the IPU itself, it can be difficult to distinguish posters' playfulness from any personal attitudes, beliefs, and moral sensibilities. However, posters do often reveal their ideological orientations, most directly in their choice of epigraphs. An epigraph is the signature of the poster; the last thing one sees before the next post. Many internet posters from the alt.atheist forum have unique epigraphs, usually in the form of a quotation espousing rational thought or rejecting unsubstantiated belief or superstition. Of the posters in our sample, at least twenty-four had quoted or invented lines that are clearly recognizable as epigraphs (perhaps more, because it is sometimes difficult to distinguish what is intended as an epigraph).

[35] What is particularly striking about the epigraphs of IPU posters is the consistency of moral and ideological position among these otherwise disconnected individuals. For example, one poster quotes the website www.rinderpest.com as follows: "The good thing about the Internet is that no matter how many repressed cretins with outmoded morals and religious fundamentalist idiots hate what you have to say, they cannot burn a website." Needless to say, a lightly humorous remark about the IPU takes on a different meaning in a posting that references "fundamentalist idiots" and book burnings. Such references to idiocy and stupidity are common in IPU writers' posts and epigraphs, as in an epigraph that plays upon Ockham's Razor to define "Hanlon's Razor" as "Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity." Another epigraph quotes Chapman Cohen: "Gods are fragile things; they may be killed by a whiff of science or a dose of common sense."

[36] Whereas IPU postings are funny, the accompanying epigraphs are overwhelmingly serious. A kind of high-mindedness in the epigraphs and other statements of value orientation invests in the IPU project a meaningfulness, a moral depth. There is a point to all the silliness: As one epigraph puts it, "Subjects most likely to be declared inappropriate for humor are the ones most in need of it." Virtually every IPU poster evinces in one way or another a preference for rationality based on empirically verifiable data, critical thinking, and employs humor in defense of these.

[37] These epigraphs, taken together with statements of value in posts themselves, demonstrate a coherent system of values; they reveal the belief commitments of this group. According to Smith, "belief commitments" are the beliefs we have that form the foundations of our knowledge and therefore shape our worldviews and ideologies. In other words, belief commitments serve as our initial beliefs; the beliefs that form the starting points of one's collective knowledge. Seen in this way, IPU posters are involved in the construction of belief commitments through an ongoing and loosely ritualized process.

[38] Acknowledging IPU posters' shared belief commitments is a good way to observe underlying ritual and religious process. We can also consider this as an example of constructed narratives as a means to shared identity (Somers).[5] IPU posters use parody to present religious beliefs as absurd and to assert the shared value of rational thought. Thus, the construction of belief commitment or narrative does not occur in a vacuum; the identity that emerges comes in part as a reaction against religious groups that hold opposing values. IPU posters clearly see mainstream religious groups as valuing "faith" above consistent research findings or theoretical developments that meet the conditions of Ockham's Razor. The result is what Steven Lukes calls "mutually denunciatory" values; the IPU narrative is antithetical to unquestioning belief. "Religious" comes to be categorically defined as the polar opposite of "atheist." The identities that emerge are mutually denunciatory; to value one is to denounce the other. Evidence of mutually denunciatory values can be found in the following anonymous post, given in dialog form on the alt.atheist forum:

> Theist: "Believe in God."
>
> Atheist: "Why? I don't believe in things that I can't detect (or see, feel, whatever)."
>
> Theist: "Not all things can be detected. God is one of those things."
>
> Atheist (too lazy to point out the contradiction of having knowledge of something defined as undetectable): "Well, so is the IPU. Do you believe in that as well? Now you come along, claiming that God in fact *is* detectable, and that our IPU is a strawman. In that case, we're back at square one. If God can be detected by us, why don't we?"

[39] In this post, the author writes that he or she does not believe in things that are undetectable. A belief commitment is implicit nonetheless; only those data that are empirically verifiable or "detectable" are to be considered. Privileging empirical data in this way is taken to be incompatible with faith. This assumption occurs in one way or another in almost every posting in our sample.

The New Atheist Angle

[40] Because the IPU project emerged mostly in the alt.atheist forum, it should not surprise us that IPU posts show affinity for atheist and especially New Atheist thought. The term New Atheism describes a contemporary movement popularized through the work of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, among others. New Atheist thought is characterized by militant rejection and criticism of theistic belief and arguments, as well as a strong valuation of reason over faith, empirical evidence over belief, and rational thinking free from the influence of authority. What makes the New Atheists "new" is their dedication to undermining the perceived absurdity of religious belief in general.

[41] In regard to the above dialog, it is worth pointing out that the atheist's question of why one might believe in God goes unanswered. Rather, the interest remains focused on beliefs

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[5] In fact, it is difficult to see how in this case there is any difference in theoretical utility between belief commitments and narratives.

themselves. This difference, too, resonates with common atheist positions in which potential social or psychological results are held secondary to the importance of rational thought. That is to say, this posting suggests a view in which belief in something incorrect that needs to be corrected – even if it has positive impact.

[42] In the dialog, the atheist not only gets the upper hand, but also demonstrates a cool, even droll detachment. The phrase "too lazy to point out" is characteristic of many IPU postings. Although the writer is arguably incorrect in the implication that knowledge requires detection, the implication is that the conclusions are so obvious it is tedious to bother with the details. The argument is elliptical and thus comical on more than one level, intentionally.

[43] We should not conclude that the IPU is simply a religion or that the IPU posters are confused about this. In fact, the danger of the IPU project taking on the characteristics of "real" religions is a concern that posters address quite directly. Some see some of the philosophical debates concerning the IPU as going too far. In response to a posted claim that the IPU had become a religion, one writer responded as follows:

> I'll say this very slowly.
> You almost had the point of this there for a second.
> The IPU 'argument' is just a joke.
> That's it.
> It's not a 'dogma' or a 'belief system.'
> It's a joke.
> It is not a serious attempt to 'refute' arguments about 'god' thingies,
> it is a method of *mocking* arguments about 'god' thingies . . .
> . . . It certainly forms no 'cornerstone' of a real atheistic rebuttal of the
> arguments for 'god' thingies (poster known as Dr. Necrophage).

[44] Although this author calls for a purely comical interpretation of the IPU, he or she, like many IPU posters, has an epigraph that displays a more serious side, in this case a quote by Omar Kayyam that very uncharacteristically has religious implications: "The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it." Yet, Dr. Necrophage is defensive. The claim that the IPU is a religion apparently contradicts something important about the nature of his or her connection to the IPU group. The claim that to mock is not to refute or argue suggests a preference for detached, almost objective parody. Whether such objectivity is possible in this context is another matter; what is telling here is the author's clear assumption that it is.

Conclusion

[45] At first glance, the Invisible Pink Unicorn is simply a fun project with some utility as a means of countering literalist belief systems. Yet IPU posters do not simply mock religion without their personal religious or quasi-religious philosophies seeping into the discussion. Their writings and epigraphs reveal a complex system of practices relevant to a normative set of values and assumptions, and, ultimately, a shared sense of the sacred – essentially a "Church" in Durkheimian terminology. Yet it is a very abstract form of Church, given its virtual context and the lack of any face-to-face interaction between those involved, not to

mention their staunchly anti-religious orientation. Yet these conditions serve to pare the ritual practices of this group down to their most elemental form, devoid of meaningful social institutions, economic outcomes, fixed hierarchies of roles, or other aspects of ordinary congregational life in non-virtual settings. Neither do IPU posters engage in emotionally charged processes that some scholars have taken as the essence of rituals (e.g., Collins; Ehrenreich).

[46] Some contemporary studies of ritual and religion focus not only on behavior within rituals, but also on the impact on participants' everyday lives as well. This approach stems from the work or Robert Orsi, who terms this new focus "lived religion" and describes it as ". . . a study of how particular people, in particular places and times, live in, with, through, and against the religious idioms available to them in culture . . ." (7). The focus on religious people acting in their cultures is what is important in lived religion. Yet to what extent should the behavior of IPU posters count as part of everyday life and to what extent as ritual activity that is separate and distinct? The current study does not address IPU posters' behavior beyond the virtual world in which they merely post comments. But it is likely that the humor carries over into these posters' everyday lives, and IPU posting can be easily imagined as a means to developing or practicing one's sense of humor. Perhaps these rituals are best conceived as a form of training.

[47] Asad's genealogical study of ritual treated monastic rituals of the Middle Ages similarly as a form of training. Monks engaged in their daily liturgies as a means of linking their outward behavior and inner states. Even such practices as copying manuscripts served to discipline monks and allowed the cultivation of Christian comportment and attitudes. Ritual, in this manner, involves practice in both senses of the term: 1) religious practices (i.e., a liturgy) and 2) drill or training. Asad conceives of this disciplinary concept of ritual being gradually replaced during the Renaissance by a new interest in etiquette and outward display – not for the development of idealized inner characteristics, but as a means to greater social standing. In courtly rituals, a break was assumed between the inner person and the outer presentation, and this break stood in stark contrast to the monks' use of ritual as a means of linking the two.[6]

[48] In this sense, IPU posters can be said to resemble medieval monks in that their practices would naturally serve to instill or reinforce the group's shared ideological beliefs. That is, one might conceive of the IPU phenomenon as a process whereby participants repeatedly and outwardly express their values as a means of solidifying the lived experience of shared involvement in the group's value system. In Geertzian terms, it might be argued that IPU posting serves as a ritual means to shared moods and motivations.[7] But the link to

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[6] Asad's larger interest is in the development of anthropological conceptions of rituals, but we are here interested in the social uses of rituals, not the conceptual underpinnings of analysis, hence our reference is limited only to his analysis of ritual practice.

[7] It is interesting to note here that in the absence of a clear authoritative structure, as is the case in the virtual context, Asad's critique of Geertz's failure to adequately account for power disappears, and there is little meaningful difference between their two approaches.

motivations is not exact. Rather, IPU posting is a sacramental process that involves outward and virtual symbols of an inward and decidedly not spiritual grace.[8]

[49] Yet, IPU posters are not directly involved in the enactment of some profound "truth," as Asad or Geertz would assume. They are "chatting," after all, and internet chatterers are among the heaviest users of the internet (Brignall and Van Valey) – this is thus normal internet behavior. But it is also normalizing interaction. IPU posters are involved in a redundant process that sacralizes their particular value orientation precisely by de-sacralizing religious beliefs, authority, and common social norms. The ritual process these posters employ – communication by means of repeated posts that evince the same form of humor – serves a normative end.

[50] In this sense, the occasional pro-religious poster who argues that the IPU is, in fact, a religion has a point. There is a clear quasi-religious program at work. Religious institutions also de-sacralize other religions and may employ essentially the same process to do so. However, IPU posters who adamantly claim to not be doing religion also have a point. By deliberately and systematically spoofing the means by which religious icons and religious ephemera become sacralized, they cannot be said to be merely practicing religion. Theirs, after all, is a group that can jokingly consider what wine would go best with their "god." The IPU phenomenon is not a religion in and of itself. Yet IPU postings also reveal beliefs and values that *are* held sacred, as can be seen in the consistent praise for critical thought and rationality, the lambasting of idiocy, and the sorts of epigraphs posters choose for themselves.

[51] Perhaps we might call the IPU an "un-religion." But there are other indications that it does not function as a complete religion. As with any virtual group, there can be no concrete sense of "congregation." The members do not know each other and most do not divulge their real names. Neither does participation in this group lead to any meaningful form of social support, social capital, or mutual obligation. It is likely that heavy participation in this group would foster *anomie*. In short, this group's high value for rationality does not translate into the development of pro-social behaviors that would serve to link people into effective organizations. In a very real sense, there is no Church of the IPU. Without such organizational outcomes, the IPU phenomenon is not likely to last, or to develop into a social organization of any consequence.

[52] However, it is not safe to assume that this community will not continue to evolve or even become influential in the "real" world, as have some other New Atheist projects. For instance, after a single post explaining her idea for the "Atheist Bus" campaign, Ariane Sherine eventually raised enough money to fund the now infamous advertisement that reads "There is probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." Clearly, internet communities like the IPU are capable of moving from an internet forum to a more public venue. Moreover, although the IPU community itself may prove ephemeral, the set of values its posters promote, as well as the ritual means to such promotion, are likely to migrate with

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[8] Whereas "sacrament" is more traditionally defined as an outward and visible symbol of an inward and spiritual grace.

the posters to other social milieu they may explore – quite ironic given that the group's main critique of religion centers on belief rather than values.

[53] This study's findings suggest that the IPU critique of religion is mostly misdirected. The belief commitments of religious people usually have less to do with beliefs than commitments, as evidenced by the overwhelming lack of theological understanding that characterizes a typical congregation. Stephen Prothero has demonstrated how shallow are the religious understandings among even committed "believers," who often lack basic understandings of their faiths. Congregations seldom, if ever, achieve uniformity of belief, and even the most canonic religious writings consistently reveal an *ad hoc* approach to practical problem solving and ritual practice – not merely abstract beliefs. Orthopraxy trumps orthodoxy for the simple reason that few congregants have the time or resources to master a theological system fully. There is in almost any congregation an obvious subordination of religious ideology to the means, usually ritualized, underlying what appears to matter most to religious people: a felt sense of social solidarity, the "fullness" of which Taylor writes, or just the practical means to well-behaved teens, socially connected elders, and a lively annual rummage sale.

[54] The findings presented here raise interesting questions about the nature of interaction that deserve follow up research. For instance, whereas Le Bon's concept of the "group mind" notoriously failed to define where this new mind was located, Turner and Killian's emergent norm theory places the collective consciousness in an ongoing process of interaction (Sandstrom et al.). Yet, emergent norm theory, in turn, fails to account for how groups employ rituals to pattern the norms that emerge. Another area of future research concerns the extent to which affect may be involved in virtual rituals.

[55] The IPU represents an interesting case of ritual behavior that meets few of the conditions previously assumed to be definitive of rituals. This basic form of ritual, purified to its essentials, involves participation in a process that develops and maintains a moral orientation. In its purest form, ritual appears to involve the formation of moral communities, though not necessarily by means of the effervescence and group gatherings that Durkheim assumed.

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