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The Church of the SubGenius

The Church of the SubGenius was founded in 1980 as a satirical mail-order religion based out of Dallas, Texas. Its central motifs were established in a tri-fold booklet, *SubGenius Pamphlet #1*, pseudonymously authored by "Rev. Ivan Stang" (Douglass St. Clair Smith, b. 1953-) and "Dr. Philo Drummond" (Steve Wilcox, b. unknown). Published by the SubGenius Foundation, the pamphlet presented the teachings of J.R. "Bob" Dobbs (fig.1), the Church's evidently bogus prophet, whose absurdist revelations mocked New Age beliefs, doomsday cults, and evangelical Christianity. Just below the surface of its satirical posing, though, laid a doctrine of spiritual exaltation, or "slack," which could only be attained by way of a totalizing rejection of mainstream values.

The Church would have most likely languished in obscurity if it were not for the creators of *Anarchy Comics*, Jay Kinney (b. 1950-) and Paul Mavrides (b. 1952-). They spread the word of "Bob" through the underground comix industry, which led numerous artists, notably R. Crumb (b. 1943-), to promote the Church in their work. By the end of the 1980s, the Church had attracted approximately five thousand dues-paying members, and its unofficial following was at least twice that size. Joining the Church was exceeding easy, and required no commitment. Interested parties were invited to mail one dollar to the SubGenius Foundation in Dallas in exchange for an ordination certificate, the *Doktorate of the Forbidden Sciences*. The Foundation encouraged members to self-publish their own SubGenius →fanzines, and the autonomous circulation of "zines" transformed the Church from a mail-order religion to a robust network of epistolary correspondence. By 1983, the SubGenius Foundation was at the center of the transgressive avant-garde that would usher in the boom in underground publishing known as the "zine scene".



Fig.1: The face of J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, known as the "Dobbshead," originated as an unattributed piece of clip-art created in the 1950s. Having been all but forgotten, the image of "Bob" was appropriated by The Church of the SubGenius in the late 1970s. After the publication of their first pamphlet, the Church acquired the copyright for the image, and it quickly became the Church of the SubGenius' central icon.

The Foundation's own tabloid publication, *The Stark Fist of Removal*, served as the touchstone for the SubGenius movement. This expansive zine showcased the most impressive material that circulated among the Church's decentralized membership. Though SubGeniuses utilized a range of media, the initial mode of SubGenius evangelism was self-recorded stream-of-consciousness diatribes, termed "rants" and "brags". These brash proclamations formed the basis for SubGenius doctrine, which was not fixed, but a fluctuating process of co-creation premised on ironically overzealous enthusiasm for "Bob". As the movement expanded, its slapstick ideology became a maze of self-reflexivity that surpassed mere parody. By 1985, the Church was no longer an in-joke amongst underground cognoscenti, but an international faction of psychedelic antinomianism.

Alongside the rise of the zine scene, the SubGenius Church staged increasing larger conclaves. Beginning with the World SubGenius Convention in 1980, these excessively hedonistic gatherings serve as a staging area for the Church's improvisational rituals, many of which included the liturgical administration of psychedelic drugs. Hosted on the local, regional, and national level, these free-form events often feature "Doktor bands," loose amalgamations of SubGenius musicians who eschew harmony in lieu of free-form sound art. *The Night of Slack*, a theatrical production held over the course of two nights in the Mission District of San Francisco in 1984, represented a watershed moment for the Church's public rituals. Instead of an experiment in collaborative ritualism, this grandiose stage production

drew a clear line between audience and performer. From this point onwards, a number of former advocates of the SubGenius movement criticized the Foundation for "selling out". What was once a participatory *ludibrium*, they argued, had become a consumer spectacle. Acrimony mounted as the SubGenius Foundation proceeded to sign a number of book deals with mainstream publishers, which led to other commercial opportunities, such as the promotional video they recorded for the cable television channel Mtv, and the full length SubGenius film, *ARISE!* (1992). Bolstered by an influx of celebrity members, SubGenius stalwarts enjoyed mainstream exposure throughout the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s, and continue to produce radio shows, internet content, and utopian conclaves up to the present.

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