

Ep 55: Pastafarianism and the meaning of 'religion'

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(Derk Venema, DV) maybe that is the way to start a religion - do something completely

a young physics graduate, Bobby Henderson, to the Kansas School Board. The aim of the

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letter was to protest against the possibility, under consideration by the board, of allowing

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absurd and people will be interested....

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intelligent design or creationism to be taught in schools alongside the theory of evolution.

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(Emma Park, EP): You're listening to episode 55 of the National Secular Society podcast produced by Emma Park.

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Henderson purported to believe, among other things, that the world was created by a flying spaghetti

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After a few weeks pause for the summer, I'm now back to present our usual fortnightly podcasts.

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monster and that the decrease in the global pirate population since the 1800s was a direct

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Between now and Christmas, we've got a range of episodes lined up on the key secularist

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cause of global warming. He argued that if the Christian theory of intelligent design should

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issues of the day. I'll be interviewing guests on topics from law reform to education and from

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be taught in schools equal time should be given to flying spaghetti monsterism otherwise known as

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British politics to secularism around the world. This episode, I'm starting on a lighter note with

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Pastafarianism. In 2005 the internet was relatively young - Facebook had only been invented the previous

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the topic of Pastafarianism. As you may know, this movement was born in 2005 with an open letter from

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year but the world wide web was developed enough for Henderson's letter to go viral, giving rise to

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a movement that has continued to grow and evolve in perhaps unexpected ways. In 2006, Henderson

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published the Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, setting out the supposed beliefs of Pastafarianism

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and eight 'I'd really rather you didn't's' models on the ten commandments. Today some even

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claim that Pastafarianism is the world's fastest growing religion - it has certainly annoyed the

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authorities in some places. In Greece in 2012, a 27 year old man was given a suspended jail sentence

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for running a facebook page, Elder Pastitios, a Pastafarian parody of Elder Paisios, a holy monk.

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In Russia last year, Mikhail Losilevich, the leader of the church of the FSM in Nizhny Novgorod,

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was arrested on charges of association with an undesirable political organization -

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but is Pastafarianism really a religion? If not, what distinguishes a flying spaghetti monster

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from any other supernatural being or wearing a colander from donning any other garb in the

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name of one's beliefs. For secularists, perhaps the most important point is that Pastafarianism

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has been invoked several times, with mixed success, to challenge the right of religious organizations

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to special privileges and exemptions as well as to have their doctrines taught in school on a par

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with scientific theories. Indeed it might be argued that Pastafarianism poses a fundamental challenge

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to the State's attempts to define religion in a coherent way or in a way that justifies its

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special treatment in the law of many democracies. To explore these questions, I will be speaking in

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turn to three guests with different perspectives on Pastafarianism and the meaning of religion.

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My first guest is Derk Venema, an assistant professor of legal philosophy at the open

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university in the Netherlands and a former secondary school German teacher. Derk featured in

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the documentary 'I, Pastafari' which came out last year as the legal representative of Pastafarians

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fighting for their right to wear a colander on their head in their driving license photo.

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Derek Venema, welcome to the podcast. (Derek Venema, DV): Thank you. (EP): First of all, you featured in the documentary

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I, Pastafari. How did you become involved in representing three Pastafarians in the Dutch

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courts? (DV): Eh well, I actually represented two of them - the other was represented by someone else but...

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Well the first who, who went to court was the founder of the Dutch church of the flying

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spaghetti monster, Dirk Jan Dijkstra but this was before I had even heard of this religion in 2014,

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that was, I think, but in 2016 I was teaching an introductory course to the philosophy of law

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to law students and human rights was an important angle in this course and I was looking for

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examples on the internet, questions, philosophically interesting, concerning the freedom of religion

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and then I discovered that in, in a nearby university there was a student who was challenging

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the rejection of his driver's license application because of the spaghetti strainer he was wearing

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in the photograph and he, he said he was a Pastafarian - a member of the church of the

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flying spaghetti monster - but um apparently the, the city didn't accept that as a valid reason for

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wearing that spaghetti strainer on his head and he was challenging this decision, this rejection

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and he would appear on a, before a commission that would handle his, his case um and um

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the, the Dutch uh church of the flying spaghetti monster had uh decided that, that this would be a

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Pastafarian uh mass and normally these sittings are not uh public but the, the city um decided

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um apparently that they would accommodate the Pastafarians and make it public. I explained all

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this to the students because I thought it was a fun and a fun example and it would appeal to them

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to discuss the, the problem of what, what is actually a religion and when do the, the freedom

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of religion rights and privileges apply to you.
In other words, when do you actually have a,
a

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real religion? So, I saw on Facebook that the
Dutch Pastafarians had proclaimed it as a
Pastafarian

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mass and one of the students suggested it
would be a nice field trip and well of all

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the couple of hundred students only a couple
uh went with me to this uh, to this
commission hearing

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but this was one of the most hilarious
things I have ever witnessed because

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this student who explained his case and said
that he really was a, a believer, a Pastafarian,

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who needed to wear the colander on his head
for religious reasons, he was, well in our

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view, he was playing his role excellently and
the, the commission really had a tough time
not

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laughing and keeping a straight face, uh and,
and so did we in the improvised public gallery

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we bit our tongues and tried not to laugh and
then afterwards we met with the, with the
applicant uh

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which is Mathe' the, the guy I represented
and which was also recorded in the uh in the
documentary and

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and we discovered that well, although he
thought it was a fun experience too, he was
also very serious

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about the underlying questions, the questions
about um, when does a, how, when and how
do um

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administrative bodies get to decide what is a
religion and, and what is not? and, and who
gets uh

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to enjoy religious privileges and who doesn't?
and, and then in his legal representative at
that time

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was Dirk Jan Dijkstra who was also the
founder of the Dutch church of the flying
spaghetti

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monster and then they asked me to represent
this student Mathe' for the next step when we
took the

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case to court because obviously we, we all
knew that the commission would deny the
application

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again. So, so then they asked me to, to
represent him and then uh one of the
students who is Mienke de Wilde

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who, she later also joined the the Dutch
church of the flying spaghetti monster and
also

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applied for a driver's license, license with
a, with a colander photo and also uh, uh got

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her application rejected so, and then I
together with her, we developed most of the
arguments

0:08:13.520,0:08:20.240
in her case so I handled that case uh as well.
(EP): .. And then these two cases were heard
separately?

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(DV): Yes, they were separate. Yeah.

0:08:23.873,0:08:31.520
(EP): So Mienke is originally one of your
students then? (DV): Exactly, yes. (EP): .. and
she was inspired to wear the colander as a
result of the field trip? (DV): Yeah, yes she was

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she was. Yes. (EP): So, so in the Mienke's and
Mathe's cases, what legal points did the two
cases

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ultimately turn on? and what was the basis for
the judge's decisions? - I mean did they both
reject

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um, their right to wear the colander in their
driving licence photo? (DV): Yes. Yes in both
cases

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uh the right was rejected. Um, Mienke's case
was the only case that we took all the way to
the highest

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administrative court in the Netherlands
where we lost and now it is, the case is um

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'ripening', as we say, in Strasbourg where, at
the European Court of Human Rights. So the
legal

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point is that in the Netherlands if you apply
for a, for an official photo id, a driver's license

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or an id card or a passport um you need a
photo uh without any headwear except, um if

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headwear is necessary for medical or
religious reasons, um and so if you have a,

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uh, if you want to wear a headscarf for
example and you say I'm a muslim it's no
problem

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you can wear it as long as your face is visible
enough. The same goes for other religions for

0:09:44.480,0:09:50.560
for Sikhs for example or for Jews who wear
religious headwear but if you're, you say you
are

0:09:51.360,0:09:58.560
a Pastafarian well they look a bit strange and I
think "hmmm, they are trying to put me on"
and of course

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civil servants do not like to be
put on and so they tend to reject

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these um these applications. We even
discovered that there is uh, there was a lot of
communication

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by the city administrations with the ministry for the interior where uh, they were advised to deny

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all these applications by people who wear spaghetti strainers on their, on their heads.

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So what it turns around is the question 'Is it a religious reason to wear, do you have a bona fide

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religious reason to wear a colander on your head and for that there is, there is no, well in most

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western countries there is no, uh, such thing as an exhaustive list of recognized religions or

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anything and neither do we have legal definitions of religion but the European Court of Human Rights

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does have some sort of a definition and that is what courts uh, use in, in Europe

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and, ...well it's not an actual definition, it's rather, sort of, a set of parameters uh and it,

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it's, it reads as follows - literally, it's the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion,

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denotes views that attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance.

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This was used in, in several cases by the European Court of Human Rights and what it,

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what it ultimately turns on is the seriousness criterion which is uh, obvious probably because

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uh because of the, the many uh, parody and satire elements in well, in Pastafarianism. So, Dutch

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administration of, of officials and, and judges they have consistently not accepted the seriousness of

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the believers in question. So they say, well you're okay uh, cogent - it's, it's cogent enough, it's um, uh

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there is enough cohesion in, in the, the belief uh, and the the Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster

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but oh, and there's enough importance - and importance is actually an easy criterion because

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that only means um how important it is to the believer himself (EP): Right, so purely subjective then ?

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(DV):Yeah, so that's subjective and that's, that's an easy hurdle uh to take but the seriousness um,

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that, that's the problem because they say well, there is uh, an element of uh, a parody uh and

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it's, it's so pervasive this, this parody element that uh there is not enough seriousness left

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so we cannot call this a religion in the legal sense of the European Court of Human Rights,

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so, uh, you don't have religious reasons for your um, colander so we cannot accept this, this photograph.

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(EP): And so currently um, Pastafarianism in general in the Netherlands is just... doesn't have any

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recognized legal status? (DV): Uh, it does and it doesn't uh, because this uh, the, the same uh Dirk Jan

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um founded the Dutch uh uh church of the flying spaghetti monster he um, got the church recognized

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um, uh, at the the chamber of commerce uh which is a separate um, procedure uh, it's just to, to

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register uh, an organization such as an association or a foundation um, you have to register

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uh with the chamber of commerce and the church is a, is a separate form of organization (EP): Does that

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have to satisfy any religious criteria? (DV): Hardly, hardly uh it, it's, it's a very, it's much easier

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procedure (EP): So, so it is recognized as as specifically a church? (DV): Yes. Yes a church as

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as a specific form of organization and not as a, not recognized in the sense of that it is a

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real or official uh religion. So, so those are two separate things and we tried to use this um

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fact that the chamber of commerce did accept the church of the flying spaghetti monster as a church

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organization uh in the in the procedure before the, before the administrative court but they

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did not accept it. They said no, that's another administrative body and we are not bound to its

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decisions so um, uh, tough luck. (EP): So apart from id cards and this sort of administrative um,

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recognition of the um Pastafarianism as a church in the Netherlands or, under what circumstances might

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the courts in, in the Netherlands or in any Western democracy need to consider or have they considered

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what counts as a bona fide religion? (DV): Uh well, in theory um, there there would be numerous um,

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occasions theoretically as many as there are laws awarding special rights or privileges, exemptions,

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facilities to religious persons as opposed to non-religious persons. Um, so if you want to

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get any of those facilities or privileges uh with your small, unknown, new or

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strange religion it might, you might end up in court and an example is that in the Netherlands

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uh members of the Santo Daime church, which is a church originating in South America - it's a

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hodgepodge of um, indigenous and cultural uh, Catholic elements and they have been prosecuted

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in the Netherlands for trafficking class A drugs namely um, DMT which is um used in the

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ayahuasca tea um which is, which they take in their mass uh and then they vomit violently and then

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hallucinate and uh, experience um, contact with the virgin Mary or something um so this, this um class

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A drug dimethyltryptamine - DMT - they were arrested for, for having it and then they said

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no, no, no this is our freedom of religion - we cannot express uh our religion when we do not take these,

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these drugs and the court actually decided in a couple of cases that okay freedom of religion in

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this case trumps the, the health legislation um and, and um so and the court in these cases was quickly

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convinced actually that Santa Daime was a real religion. They just um heard a, an anthropologist

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who explained the origin of this church uh in South America around a century ago and, and so

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so they said okay well that's that sounds like, like a true story um, it is a religion and okay

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go and drink your tea and vomit and hallucinate. (EP): You, you've mentioned the definition that the E.C.H.R.

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or the rough definition it's given of religion... um, so the case that you've got, um, Mienke's case

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that's currently awaiting sort of consideration, is that the first case on Pastafarianism or will it be ?

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(DV): Yes, yes before the European Court of Human Rights - it's the first, um, although um

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Niko Alm has also filed a, a case which has been accepted um but now it, it has yet to be

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um handled and, and we don't know when uh, when that will be and I, if I remember, remember

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correctly the German Pastafarians also filed a case which was uh rejected. (EP): Do you have any

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sense for how you think the court might um, judge your case? (DV): Yeah that's, that's

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very difficult.... some of my colleagues have uh, have told me that, that we don't stand a chance

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but I'm not so sure because well the reason the courts in the Netherlands have rejected um

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our case is because they say the, the parody or the satire element is too great - uh, it's, it's

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all parody but I hope that the European Court of Human Rights um does recognize that uh the

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the parody is in the form of getting the message across - the way, the method we try uh - not we, because

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I'm not a member of the uh church, but they try to, to get their uh message across and, and inform

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people of their uh religion - you can call that a parody but the message itself is really serious.

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It's, it's a message of uh, well it's an ethics of equality, of anti-authoritarianism, um, non-violence,

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tolerance, modesty, uh, secularist government and, of course, humour and they, they put this in the uh

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in the eight 'I'd rather you didn't's' which are like commandments but less strong. (EP) Not commandments.

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(DV): Yeah, um so and, and this is also of course um, uh parody uh but on the other hand, um, so so they,

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they use parody and they use the internet and they use all these, these fun ways to um, to get

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their message across to, to inform people - it's just a different method,

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I mean, Saint Paul wrote letters to the Romans but Pastafarians go to court with colanders

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on their heads because it appeals to the public uh more in this, in this time I think.

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(EP): It is a sort of religion or spoof religion of the internet isn't it, really? (DV): Yes, also yes, yes

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it is and, and well about the, the parody uh thing - I don't think it really sets Pastafarianism uh so

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much apart from, from other religions because if you consider uh Mormonism for example

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Mormon uh faith has such a uh, hilarious origin that it's hard to believe that anyone would take

0:20:10.080,0:20:16.080
it seriously. (EP): The Book of Mormon almost sounds like a parodic version of the old testament.

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(DV): Yeah it is, it is. It's, it's hilarious. It says that, that Jesus uh appeared in, in the United States uh,

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before it was the United States and there was a whole community there which then disappeared and

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then he got - um Joseph Smith - he received golden plates with old Egyptian writing on it and

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then he got a magic stone which helped him translate it etc. etc. - it's hilarious um, but

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maybe that is the way to start a religion - do something completely absurd and people

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will be interested and maybe in the first century A.D., Jews thought that Christianity was a bad

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joke and, and a parody of the real religion so, so it's, it's uh, when is something a parody?

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it's, it's a question of uh, probably um, um how old the religion is, if it is seen as a parody

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or as something more serious. (EP): Well this idea of seriousness and because if you say, you know, the

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Pastafarians have this serious message but I suppose one thing they don't presumably

0:21:26.800,0:21:32.480
believe seriously is the fact that there is - the idea that there is a flying spaghetti monster.

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Um, does the seriousness of a religion have to relate to um, I don't know, belief in a supernatural

0:21:38.960,0:21:45.760
being or belief in um, anything specific? (DV): Well, there has never been agreement uh, amongst uh,

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scientists or theologians or religious people on a definition of religion um, so if there

0:21:55.040,0:22:01.280
has to be something transcendent, yes or no, well is Buddhism a religion? um yes according to

0:22:02.240,0:22:08.560
almost everyone but does Buddhism really have gods and and transcendence? I, I, don't know but

0:22:08.560,0:22:13.840
um so that, that's an open question whether there is any criterion

0:22:13.840,0:22:20.800

uh to call something a religion uh or not and if you..... and that, that was one of the funny things in

0:22:20.800,0:22:28.560

in the uh the case of of Mathe' - um, at some point in court the, the judge asked me 'hmm... well I see,

0:22:28.560,0:22:37.040

I read this in, in this um, gospel uh, that uh something about um cable tv but uh presumably

0:22:37.840,0:22:45.120

this should have been, this was written um, a couple of thousand years ago, so how do you see that?'

0:22:45.120,0:22:51.680

and so I asked the judge are you seriously asking me um, to comment on the historic correctness uh,

0:22:51.680,0:22:58.240

of, of the, of religious texts? Um, so and then he said oh no, no, no, no, no and went on to

0:22:58.240,0:23:04.800

the next point. Um so and do you believe in a flying spaghetti monster? What does that mean?

0:23:04.800,0:23:10.800

It can mean a lot of things. It can mean, for example, that it's.... to, to call your supreme being uh,

0:23:11.360,0:23:21.840

by such an absurd name may mean that um, it is, it is absurd to want to describe um, the supreme being

0:23:22.480,0:23:27.600

for example, it doesn't have to mean uh, uh that you actually believe that there is

0:23:27.600,0:23:38.480

uh uh an invisible being uh, made of um, (EP): ... Pasta and meatballs... (DV): Yeah. So, so it's, it often comes up uh, they

0:23:38.480,0:23:42.480

say 'oh this is ridiculous because of, you don't really believe that there is a flying spaghetti

0:23:42.480,0:23:50.880

monster do you?' Um, uh well, that depends on uh how you interpret it and which, which also uh, goes for.....

0:23:50.880,0:23:57.840

There are very few Christians who take the bible from A to Z completely literally um,

0:23:57.840,0:24:06.080

so and, and if you start admitting that you don't have to take it literally, all the texts

0:24:06.080,0:24:13.040

of your religion, then um well, then you don't have any criterion anymore to say well, um 'Oh, if you

0:24:13.040,0:24:18.560

don't take it literally, then you're not a serious believer'. It's, it's a matter of interpretation

0:24:18.560,0:24:23.840

and experience. (EP): Yeah. So, I mean, indeed - where do you draw the line? I mean um, the court thought that um

0:24:23.840,0:24:28.960

the belief in a flying spaghetti monster is not serious but does that mean the court is entitled

0:24:28.960,0:24:34.080

to say what sort of thing might be the object of a serious belief? Is it okay to have a serious belief

0:24:34.080,0:24:39.760

that god that created the world in six days for example? (DV): Yeah, yeah. Is, is that historically

0:24:39.760,0:24:49.360

uh, uh correct? and if not, uh is it then a non-uh, non-bona fide belief? Yeah. (EP): Do you think

0:24:49.360,0:24:55.600

therefore that um Pastafarianism, as a movement, challenges this idea that religious adherence

0:24:55.600,0:25:00.880

organizations deserve special privileges and tax breaks simply because they're religious?

0:25:00.880,0:25:10.960

(DV): Yes, yes absolutely it does. Um, not explicitly - so, so Pastafarians would um, I think, not so much

0:25:12.640,0:25:17.840

say that they are uh against religious rights because they say they have a religion and so they

0:25:17.840,0:25:28.240

want these uh, religious rights uh, of course um, so but um, the, so Pastafarianism as a, as a phenomenon

0:25:28.240,0:25:37.200

uh, yes, yes it does uh, challenge this uh, this idea uh, because it, it helps um, to show how, how

0:25:37.200,0:25:43.200

ridiculous it is to award special privileges to people or to organizations just because they are

0:25:43.200,0:25:51.920

religious. Um, there are many organizations built around ideals or um, or opinions and and they

0:25:51.920,0:25:59.760

do not have um these privileges or facilities that, that are awarded to organizations that can

0:25:59.760,0:26:08.080

uh successfully tick the religious box. (EP): Is the conclusion to all this then that um if were able

0:26:08.080,0:26:12.880

in, in a secular society ideally to, to safeguard human rights without reference to religion, I mean

0:26:12.880,0:26:18.960

this would have the, the added advantage um, that then the State um, the law courts or the

0:26:18.960,0:26:24.320

administrative bodies and so forth would simply not be required to look into the seriousness or

0:26:24.320,0:26:32.640

otherwise of religious belief... (DV): Exactly, exactly. So, so um if you do away with all these um, special privileges

0:26:32.640,0:26:39.200

rights and facilities for religious organizations or people then um, government bodies wouldn't have

0:26:39.200,0:26:47.840

to decide uh, who gets to enjoy these privileges and who doesn't and uh, because some religions are

0:26:47.840,0:26:54.800

uh, are real and others are not, which is, of course, a very strange thing to have to decide

0:26:54.800,0:27:01.040

for uh, for the administration because there is uh freedom of religion which should mean

0:27:01.600,0:27:08.160

that any religion should have all the freedoms of any other religion and now

0:27:08.160,0:27:18.240

that's not the case um, precisely because of this uh, unease uh, people feel with these uh, with their

0:27:18.240,0:27:22.960

for example Pastafarianism - they think it's, it's, it's a practical joke and they don't want to

0:27:23.840,0:27:30.000

they don't want to be made fool of and uh, adherents of traditional religions, they are uh, they

0:27:30.000,0:27:36.960

are frightened because they, they think they are being made fun of and uh pretty soon everyone

0:27:36.960,0:27:45.120

will, will see that any religion is uh, just just an opinion uh, backed by uh, an age-old organization.

0:27:45.760,0:27:49.680

(EP): And just um, one final question then. Have you yourself ever considered

0:27:49.680,0:27:55.280

becoming a Pastafarian? (DV): No, no I've never considered joining any groups or organizations

0:27:55.280,0:28:03.280

that are founded on a specific idea because I don't want to be associated with, with any

0:28:03.280,0:28:11.680

specific idea or ideology. As a philosopher, I want to be free to think and express

0:28:12.720,0:28:21.680

anything I want. Which I uh, could still do as a Pastafarian which is one of the

0:28:21.680,0:28:29.840

uh, uh paradoxes in the Pastafarian uh, faith. (EP): Derk Venema, thank you very much. (DV): Thank you.

0:28:35.360,0:28:38.400

(EP): My second guest is Tanya Watkins, the self-appointed captain of the

0:28:38.400,0:28:40.960

Australian Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

0:28:40.960,0:28:44.880

Tanya is a student of religion and law at Deakin University and a carer. She'll be

0:28:44.880,0:28:49.360

talking to me about her unsuccessful attempts to win legal recognition for her church in Australia.

0:28:54.400,0:28:59.520

Captain Tanya Watkins, welcome to the podcast. (Captain Tanya Watkins, TW): Oh, thank you for having me. (EP): Pastafarianism started

0:28:59.520,0:29:05.680

in 2005 with a letter by Bobby Henderson, a recent physics graduate to the Kansas board of education,

0:29:06.320,0:29:11.520

to protest effectively against the fact that intelligent design was being taught on a level

0:29:11.520,0:29:17.680

with um, evolution in schools but how has Pastafarianism evolved since then from

0:29:18.400,0:29:27.680

a simple idea of protest into a worldwide movement? (TW): Well I think that Bobby's led, really the whole

0:29:27.680,0:29:36.480

concept behind it really attracted people's interest because they had this certain idea that

0:29:37.040,0:29:44.000

religious privilege was not a good thing and trying to teach evolution alongside um

0:29:44.000,0:29:50.720

creationism in a science classroom is just not a good thing because you're presenting something

0:29:50.720,0:29:57.920

that is a belief as being a fact. (EP): So that, that was the beginning um so a protest specifically against

0:29:57.920,0:30:02.880

creationism but what about, I mean, since then there have been many many other developments to

0:30:02.880,0:30:08.080

Pastafarianism and the idea of pirates, climate change, the idea of wearing a colander on your head.

0:30:08.080,0:30:13.040

(TW): Because so many people were interested in what Bobby was saying, he got a book deal and so he

0:30:13.040,0:30:20.000

wrote the Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and that kind of brought out more I guess, um

0:30:20.560,0:30:27.440

details on, you know how, people should live their lives while at the same time questioning faith and

0:30:28.160,0:30:33.600

all of these other things that are going on in the world and it just really struck more and

0:30:33.600,0:30:38.800

more chords with people around the world and people..... yeah, hold on, he's onto something here

0:30:38.800,0:30:44.720

and so from there it grew online. There's only one physical church I think in the world and

0:30:44.720,0:30:51.680

that's in Germany and the rest of us we're just entirely online community although we do do

0:30:51.680,0:30:59.440

things out in the real world um and it just, yeah it just snowballed as more people learned about it

0:31:00.480,0:31:08.000

it became a thing that got its own law and, you know, um we have different sects - we have the

0:31:08.000,0:31:13.360

the pirates sect where people dress up as pirates and we have the colander sect where people put

0:31:13.360,0:31:17.920

colanders on their heads um and then we have a whole group of people who don't dress up at all.

0:31:18.480,0:31:22.720

(EP): What do you have?, What some criteria do you have to fulfill in order to be a Pastafarian?

0:31:23.440,0:31:30.640

(TW): Just want to be one. That's it. (EP) : Just declare that you are one? (TW): Exactly. Yes. (EP): What does Pastafarianism

0:31:30.640,0:31:39.040

mean to you personally? (TW): Well to me personally, it's a whole life philosophy because if you

0:31:39.040,0:31:44.400

look at what it's saying, it's saying just be nice to other people. You know, you're not better than

0:31:44.400,0:31:52.320
anybody else. We're all equal, we're all the same. Just, just be nice to everyone. (EP): How popular is Pastafarianism

0:31:52.320,0:31:58.240
down under? (TW): That's very difficult to gauge because we have a lot of people who

0:31:58.880,0:32:05.600
aren't necessarily joining in with the online communities but they do identify themselves as um,

0:32:05.600,0:32:11.600
as Pastafarians and, you know, they go out and do things and then I hear about them so I know

0:32:11.600,0:32:16.400
those people are out there. Online we have a community of about six and a half thousand

0:32:17.040,0:32:24.240
and according to the last census, there's possibly up to a hundred thousand of us. (EP): How did you become

0:32:24.240,0:32:28.800
captain of the flying spaghetti monster church and what do you actually have to do

0:32:28.800,0:32:34.400
as captain. (TW): I saw a whole load of Pastafarians out there in the world who didn't have one

0:32:34.400,0:32:41.680
solid place to go to, so I just basically created it. Started on Facebook. I just started the

0:32:42.400,0:32:48.320

Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster Australia, declared myself official and people followed. (EP): Right.

0:32:49.520,0:32:56.320
So yeah, all self-declaration then. (TW): Well, we all are. All religion is self-declaration. (EP): Sure.

0:32:57.280,0:33:06.160
Um, and what what do you now do as captain? (TW): Well I try to get us recognition. Um, I also run the community

0:33:06.160,0:33:13.520
so I look after people. If people need help, I give them help. Um, I try to stop people from arguing.

0:33:14.080,0:33:20.640
I try to inform them about human rights, equality and about why they should be nice to other people.

0:33:21.600,0:33:27.920
(EP): How long have you been a Pastafarian for? (TW): Since I think, 2012. (EP): So just

0:33:27.920,0:33:33.520
maybe a year after that then, since 2013 onwards, you've made several applications all of which have

0:33:33.520,0:33:39.760
been unsuccessful so far (TW): Yeah three applications. Yes. (EP): Three applications - good - to have the Church

0:33:39.760,0:33:45.360
of the Flying Spaghetti Monster in Australia legally incorporated. (TW): Yeah, just as an association.

0:33:46.480,0:33:51.280
(EP): Right. What would be the purpose of incorporation? (TW): Well, when you're incorporated

0:33:51.280,0:33:57.520
you become, well you don't become - the,
the incorporation becomes - a legal person so

0:33:58.320,0:34:04.400
it's able to have a bank account. It's able to
own assets. It's able to enter into contracts.

0:34:05.280,0:34:09.760
All of those sorts of things that,
you know, your basic church can do.

0:34:10.640,0:34:16.160
(EP): Would it be in keeping with the original
spirit of Pastafarianism as being quite sort of
anarchic to

0:34:16.160,0:34:23.680
to start getting all the same sort of structures
as a religion, an organized religion. (TW): Not
really,

0:34:23.680,0:34:28.880
because one of the things in the gospel, it says
where you see that yeah a religion is getting

0:34:28.880,0:34:35.280
some kind of special treatment uh you should
also try to get that.
(EP): And what would you hope to do with

0:34:35.280,0:34:41.040
um, if you had your own bank account. You
could um purchase your own assets, what
would be the aim?

0:34:41.040,0:34:46.320
(TW): I think the aim would be, we could raise
money and we could do a lot more 'feed the
hungry' events.

0:34:47.600,0:34:53.760
Ultimately, we would love to build a homeless
shelter, mainly for people from the rainbow
pride

0:34:53.760,0:35:01.600

community because they're very um let down
by the religious homeless shelters. (EP): Do
organized religions -

0:35:01.600,0:35:06.960
recognized religions at least - have privileges
under Australian law. (TW): There is no such
thing

0:35:07.840,0:35:12.400
as a recognized religion in Australia -
there are just exemptions from things.

0:35:13.040,0:35:18.800
So, you get tax exemptions, property tax and
all that sort of stuff. You don't have to pay any
of

0:35:18.800,0:35:25.040
that, whereas if you're a secular organization,
you'd have to. (EP): So you would be hoping
um that

0:35:25.040,0:35:30.080
the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster
could benefit from those same tax
exemptions? (TW): Um, I was

0:35:30.080,0:35:35.280
not ever going to apply for tax exemptions
because I believe all religious orders

0:35:36.560,0:35:42.080
should, they should be paying tax. (EP): So it's
sort of in a way the opposite - that you, you
don't want

0:35:42.080,0:35:47.840
either you or any religious organizations to
get tax exemptions. (TW): Exactly. Yes. (EP):
Okay well let's

0:35:47.840,0:35:54.320
look at your most recent application. Now this
was rejected and one, one of your arguments
was that it

0:35:54.320,0:35:59.600

was formed for a religious purpose or if not, it was formed for an educational charitable purpose.

0:36:00.160,0:36:06.400

Now the senior member of, of this tribunal um Ms Kathleen McEvoy refused your application so

0:36:06.400,0:36:10.720

let's focus on your leading contention that the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster was formed

0:36:10.720,0:36:16.880

for a religious purpose. So what were your main arguments um, in support of the contention that

0:36:16.880,0:36:25.280

Pastafarianism is a religion. (TW): It has all of the same elements of all, you know, any other religion has. We

0:36:25.280,0:36:31.360

have a whole set of people who believe in this. We have a certain subset of people who believe

0:36:32.240,0:36:38.160

in the flying spaghetti monster itself, you know, not everybody does but some people actually do

0:36:39.200,0:36:45.520

and we have rules of behavior um that you know we're supposed to follow. Not everybody does, of

0:36:45.520,0:36:52.320

course, but nobody does in their religions either and there's no difference really.

0:36:53.360,0:36:59.280

(EP): So you're saying that believing um in a flying spaghetti monster um made of pasta and meatballs

0:36:59.280,0:37:05.680

um and wearing pirate costume or colanders and following certain suggestions for being

0:37:05.680,0:37:10.080

nice to other people is no different from the practices and beliefs of any other religion?

0:37:11.200,0:37:17.280

(TW): Well in a sense because some people don't believe in the, in the spaghetti and meatball version

0:37:17.920,0:37:22.320

of the flying spaghetti monster - they believe in the concept of there's something that's out

0:37:22.320,0:37:28.480

there and it touches everything in the entire universe at the same time which,

0:37:28.480,0:37:34.880

you know, could be string theory, you know, it's part of everything (EP): But it's not necessary to

0:37:34.880,0:37:40.560

to do any specific thing in order to be um a Pastafarian as such? (TW): No, no. Just be alive.

0:37:41.200,0:37:47.120

(EP): Now your opponent, the commission represented by Mr Ambrose, argued that Pastafarianism is a hoax or

0:37:47.120,0:37:53.120

a sham or a parody religion and that some of its texts in addition would be insulting or offensive

0:37:53.120,0:37:59.200

to genuinely religious people and the judge seems to have basically accepted these arguments.

0:37:59.200,0:38:07.120

For you, where is the mistake in this approach? (TW): Because they don't understand the satire um

0:38:07.120,0:38:14.000
you know, I did make the argument that a modest proposal by Jonathan Swift was not an instruction

0:38:14.000,0:38:23.040
manual. It was basically a satire against the idea of poor starving Irish people eating

0:38:23.040,0:38:28.480
their own children. It was an attack against the attitudes of the day and the policies of the day

0:38:29.200,0:38:36.400
and that's what the gospel is. (EP) And so the gospel of Pastafarianism - what exactly um, if it's satire,

0:38:36.400,0:38:42.240
what exactly are its real or sort of its most important fundamental purposes? (TW): To make people

0:38:42.240,0:38:50.400
think about faith and why do we have faith, which faith we choose, why do we choose that particular

0:38:50.400,0:38:56.960
one? Which rules are we supposed to follow? Which are we supposed to ignore? What do these

0:38:58.560,0:39:05.040
weird parables mean? (EP): Is, is it also to criticize some of the the worst excess, the worst practices

0:39:05.040,0:39:11.520
of um formally established religions? (TW): Yeah to an extent but to do it with humour because if you

0:39:11.520,0:39:18.640
get people laughing, they're not as offended as if you just go at them angrily about something.

0:39:18.640,0:39:24.880
We have a 30-day policy where basically try us for 30 days - if you don't like us your old

0:39:24.880,0:39:30.800
religion will probably take you back and that's kind of a way of saying that some people can't

0:39:30.800,0:39:36.160
leave their religions because, you know, various reasons, you know, either they'll be in danger,

0:39:36.160,0:39:40.560
they'll lose all their friends their family - that's not going to happen in Pastafarianism.

0:39:41.680,0:39:50.560
(EP): What positive benefits would you say you provide to people? (TW): Comfort because people do need comfort.

0:39:50.560,0:39:57.200
They need a community. They need a community of like-minded people and they need to be able to um,

0:39:58.800,0:40:02.960
you know, feel like they belong to something they, so they don't feel

0:40:02.960,0:40:07.040
like they're outcasts which a lot of people who leave their religions, they do feel that

0:40:07.680,0:40:11.120
because they no longer have their families, they no longer have their friends.

0:40:11.120,0:40:15.680
They have to find their way out in the world, you know, because they doubted their own faith

0:40:16.720,0:40:22.320

and so we just offered them a safe landing spot. (EP): What do you do with your fellow Pastafarians in

0:40:22.320,0:40:29.440

person? (TW): In person, uh, we have our 'feed the hungry' events where we just basically you know open up

0:40:29.440,0:40:35.280

and we offer pasta meals to anybody who comes along. We don't care what faith they are - whether

0:40:35.280,0:40:39.200

they're part of the rainbow pride community whether they, you know, what color their skin is

0:40:39.920,0:40:44.400

um whether they agree with us or not we don't care. They can just all come and have a feed.

0:40:45.520,0:40:49.680

We also do social events um, obviously not so much since covid has occurred.

0:40:50.560,0:40:58.320

(EP): Is part of your point that all religious dogmas um, are based on faith without any scientific

0:40:58.320,0:41:02.960

evidence and that they're no more convincing ultimately than saying that um, you know global

0:41:02.960,0:41:08.480

warming um is inversely correlated to the number of pirates in the world? (TW): Yeah well there's, there

0:41:08.480,0:41:15.600

is no science in faith, you know. Faith is faith. If faith was able to be scientifically proven,

0:41:16.240,0:41:22.880

we'd know which one was the correct religion by now but for some reason people seem to have a desire

0:41:22.880,0:41:31.120

in them to have a belief in something and since they do, there's probably a reason for that.

0:41:31.920,0:41:37.680

(EP): The judge was sort of forced to effectively define religion and say that Pastafarianism doesn't count

0:41:37.680,0:41:42.800

as religion. Is it, should it be the role of the secular court to say what a religion is and isn't?

0:41:43.520,0:41:48.560

(TW): It absolutely shouldn't be. The whole thing is that the law should be applied the same

0:41:48.560,0:41:54.480

to everybody. You know, there shouldn't be a thing where you can get registered for being religious.

0:41:55.200,0:42:01.200

It should just be whether you have an association, everything you're doing is legal and that should

0:42:01.200,0:42:07.280

be the only criteria that there is. (EP): Where do you think Pastafarianism um is going

0:42:07.280,0:42:11.440

in Australia? Do you think it's going to get bigger or smaller over the next 10, 20 years ?

0:42:11.440,0:42:17.520

Any ideas? (TW): I think it's going to get huge to be quite honest. Uh the numbers that we're growing at

0:42:18.160,0:42:24.960

it's pretty exponential so we're going to just get bigger and bigger and bigger

0:42:26.000,0:42:31.520

until the point where they can't ignore us. (EP): What do you think the aims of Pastafarianism as a movement

0:42:31.520,0:42:38.160

should be around the world um, in say, in the next couple of decades? (TW): To question religious privilege

0:42:39.440,0:42:44.640

and also to, to promote the fact we should just always be nice to each other.

0:42:44.640,0:42:49.680

(EP): Don't, don't religions promote that idea? (TW): Yeah, some do, you know. Some don't and that's the

0:42:49.680,0:42:56.240

problem. (EP): Might there come a time in the future when Pastafarianism was no longer necessary? (TW): I hope so -

0:42:56.960,0:43:00.960

doesn't mean I hope it goes away. (EP): What would society have to be like for Pastafarianism

0:43:00.960,0:43:05.520

not to be necessary anymore? (TW): For everybody to be treated exactly equally.

0:43:06.320,0:43:11.840

(EP): Captain Tanya Watkins, thank you very much. (TW): Thank you very much.

0:43:17.120,0:43:20.800

(EP): My third guest is Dr Tony Meacham, a lecturer at Coventry University whose

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research interests include comparative

constitutional law and the different

0:43:24.000,0:43:27.360

ways in which different states treat religion. He was previously a civil

0:43:27.360,0:43:31.200

servant in Australia working in the areas of social security and higher education.

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He will be providing an objective academic perspective on the place of religion and more.

0:43:38.800,0:43:44.800

Tony Meacham, welcome to the podcast. (Dr Tony Meacham, TM): Thank you very much um, I appreciate you having me on board.

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(EP): First of all, what motivated you to write your article for the conversation

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about Pastafarianism? (TM): Basically, I came across an article in the newspaper highlighting that there

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was a documentary called I, Pastafari and that it was screening in the United States. So I'd heard

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of the Pastafarians, you know, in the general sense as most people have and I was intrigued about it

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since I'm interested in constitutional law and specifically uh, secularism and the State's

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relationship to religion I thought well it's worth having a look at uh what the documentary

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was all about and what they were saying what was the focus of the documentary and so on.
So

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there were a number of points in that documentary I found particularly interesting.

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(EP): Hmm, and what were they? (TM): Well for example um, they were showing how Pastafarianism was being

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treated around the world - that's, you know, different states like New Zealand, the United States,

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countries in Europe and where they were - the Pastafarians - were saying look if we're

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a recognized religion then we should be getting benefits, tax breaks, other things that organized

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religion normally gets. So, for example, simple thing like if you have a religious headdress

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then there are exemptions when you're getting your driver's license for people who are of a

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recognized religion to have a religious headdress. So, they argued well, we have one too - we should get

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that exemption and if we can't, why not? So they're trying to draw out what are the parameters um

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for that exemption and more broadly, uh how are you defining a religion through that definition

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of a headdress. Other points they were making was things like simply saying "look, if you're saying

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we're not a religion, prove we are not - give us the parameters by which you define religion or

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define what is a religion" . So I thought, you know, intellectually that's an interesting argument -

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how do you do so? Because in centuries past it's fairly easy to do so. Most countries you've only

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had one dominant religion and when you said religion, what you were talking about was

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that religion. In the United States for example in their early years you were talking about

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Christianity and in particular Protestantism so the two were interchangeable terms.

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In more modern times however it's been interesting to see the State trying to determine

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things that require a definition of religion by having a definition that is all encompassing, that

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covers every particular perspective. (EP): So, so has the um, the idea of the need to define religion

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really been forced upon states over the over the centuries, over the years, by the the emergence of

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new religions? (TM): Well it's not so much a force I guess - um, religion has um, always had a place

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in most communities and with that has had a protected status.

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So, for example, if you look at the Charities Act in the United Kingdom, it's always been

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accepted that religion has a charitable purpose, that, you know, they educate our people, they

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feed them, they do good things. So, in the centuries past when you had in the Charities Act

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that the Charities Act will allow a charity to be registered if it's for the purposes of

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advancement of religion, then the term religion was understood and you didn't have to work hard

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from there, you just simply said well we're the local branch of the dominant religion,

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we obviously have a charitable purpose so charity for education or whatever has now been submitted

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to you and so there should be no difficulty in recognizing our application but in recent years

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defining religion has been more problematical. (EP): How is um, religion currently defined in English law?

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(TM): Well, it depends. Most definitions of anything are usually only defined in legislation for the

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purposes of that legislation. So, for the purposes of just one piece of legislation you may have

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a definition that doesn't match with others. (EP): So, I mean in English law we've got say the

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Charities Act which defines, you know, religion or has religion for the purposes of charitable

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purpose would include the advancement of religion then we've got the equality act 2010 um making

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religion or belief a protected characteristic and then we've got the Human Rights Act as well.

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So do these all three have different definitions of religion or have different definitions been

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developed within them? (TM): Well, they do. I know I'm sounding like a lawyer here but it

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depends. Uh, if you take the Charities Act - it says religion includes a religion which involves belief

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in more than one god and a religion which does not involve belief in a god - which isn't

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terribly clear. It still assumes you understand what religion is. So, much of the discussion on

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the Charities Act leaves the definition to the court which uh doesn't help because if you really

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haven't got any sort of parameters for the courts then the courts really aren't free to just make

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this stuff out of whole cloth. If you're looking at employment tribunals, they've looked at beliefs

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in spiritualism, psychic powers, anti-fox hunting beliefs, the virtues of public service broadcasting,

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humanism but at the same time they said marxist or trotskyite beliefs, conspiracy theories and

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that poppies should be worn for Remembrance Day are not religious viewpoints. You know, for example,

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you go, if you have a religious viewpoint that says there should not be war like the Quakers

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tend to have but you've got a philosophical viewpoint that says well it should be self-evident

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war is a silly thing then is that a philosophical viewpoint or just an individual opinion? (EP): Should the

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fact that um the Quakers are pacifists, should the fact that, that their pacifism is connected with

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their religion give their beliefs a protected status which it wouldn't do if um for people

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who were pacifists but non-religious pacifists?. (TM): Yeah. (EP): Tony Meacham, thank you very much. (TM): Thank you.

0:50:44.000,0:50:48.480
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