

Yaroslav Yuvsechko
Khmelnyskyi National University (Ukraine)
ORCID: 0000-0003-4831-8096
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MODERN *QUASI*-RELIGIOUS BELIEFS: ON THE BORDER BETWEEN SACRED AND SECULAR

Współczesne *quasi*-wierzenia religijne: na granicy między sakralnością a świeckością

Abstract

The paper deals with actual problem of current stage of religious sphere's development – the emergence and vigorous activity of movements and organizations that can be characterized as *quasi*-religious. We research the characteristics of *quasi*-religions as the separate phenomena that operate mainly in the form of secular organizations and that try to transform the identity of its members in their desired direction. It is emphasized that the concepts of *quasi*-religious and pseudo-religious beliefs are not identical and require of separate religious studies research. But it can be considered that common to both phenomena is only their arising at the boundaries between sacred and secular. The paper presents a review of *quasi*-religious concepts – from Tillich to Greil, as well as a description of *quasi*-religious practices and *quasi*-religious movements.

Key words: new religious movements, *quasi*-religion, pseudo-religion, sacred, secular.

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy problematyki obecnego etapu rozwoju sfery religijnej – powstawania i prężnej działalności ruchów i organizacji, które można określić jako *quasi*-religijne. W artykule przedstawiono charakterystykę *quasi*-religii jako odrębnego zjawiska, które funkcjonuje głównie w postaci organizacji świeckich próbujących przekształcić tożsamość swoich członków w pożądanym kierunku. Podkreśla się, że koncepcje przekonań *quasi*-religijnych i pseudoreligijnych nie są identyczne i wymagają odrębnych badań religioznawczych. Można jednak uznać, że wspólne dla obu zjawisk jest tylko ich powstanie na granicy między świętością a świeckością. Artykuł zawiera przegląd koncepcji *quasi*-religijnych – od Tillicha do Greila, a także opis takich praktyk i ruchów.

Słowa kluczowe: nowe ruchy religijne, *quasi*-religia, pseudoreligia, sakralność, świeckość.

Introduction

The complexity of the study of *quasi*-religious phenomena is primarily due to the conceptual uncertainty regarding them. To date, a synonymous series has been constructed to refer to such phenomena as *quasi*-religion, para-religion, implicit (invisible) religion, secular (secularized) religion. However, in an effort to avoid the multiplication of entities and terms, one has to agree with the American researcher M. Hamilton, who proposes to identify the concept of “invisible religion”, “implicit religion”, “surrogate religion”, “*quasi*-religion”, since, for all these terms, there is “something, similar, but not quite religious, or that does not reveal similarity with religion on the surface, but it reveals it at a more detailed study” (Hamilton 2000: 65).

The main purpose of scientific research is to achieve conceptual certainty in the characteristics of *quasi-religions* and to provide evidence that it is not identical with the characteristics of pseudo-religious beliefs. The main question we want to answer in this paper is to show the boundaries between sacred and secular that the *quasi-religions* are arising at. An analysis of theoretical concepts and a description of *quasi-religious* practices and *quasi-religious* movements will help us in this.

Analysis – theoretical aspects

In fact, the term “*quasi-religion*”, together with the term “pseudo-religion”, was first used in the 1950s-1960s by German-American researchers J. Wach and P. Tillich primarily to political ideologies – ideological structures that functionally replace religion, but do not have a sacred nucleus – at least in the sense of the sacred concept that is typical of traditional religions. In a certain sense, the terms “*quasi-religion*” and “pseudo-religion” were considered to be close to the concepts of political religion or civil religion, but, unlike these concepts, they also concerned other secular worship objects that belonged not only to the political sphere.

Respectively, such experience is not the real religious experience. “Different expressions of religious experience are original if they are intended not for service of the external, which is social, political, economic, esthetic goals or personal aspirations, but for registration and preservation of deep experience – the experience of communicating with God” (Tillich 1995: 394). P. Tillich also repeatedly turned to the characteristics of the current crisis situation and often touched on the problem of *quasi-religions*, which included fascism, communism and humanism. Their emergence P. Tillich relates precisely to the process of secularization, which he evaluates positively, considering this process as a means of de-demonization: it is secular, in his opinion, that it is possible to judge from a rational position a sacred one. Secularization is liberated from what P. Tillich calls “the subjection of life to the ecstatic forms of the Sacred” (Tillich 1995: 396). But in case secular forgets about the communications with Sacred, loses deep meaning, it generates *quasi-religions*.

According to Tillich, it turns out that the transformation of an object into God, precisely, leads to the emergence of *quasi-religions*, where the finite realities substitute for real boundary realities. Tillich notes in this regard: “In secular *quasi-religions*, limiting interest is directed at such objects as a nation, a science, a special form or a state of society, or a higher ideal of mankind, which in this case is regarded as divine” (Tillich 1995: 133). Hence, P. Tillich defines *quasi-religion* as “idolatrous faith”, that is, a faith that is drawn to “false boundaries”, because “... in the idolatrous faith, prior, ultimate realities are elevated to the limit level” (Tillich 1995: 164).

Thus, *quasi-religions*, from P. Tillich’s point of view, fall under such a definition of religion, but unlike traditional religions, they have the subject of extreme interest “people, science, certain forms or stages of development of society, the supreme ideal of mankind”, and others like that. Paul Tillich particularly points out that for him, *quasi-religion* is not just an imitation of religion, but only those secular movements in society that “demonstrate convincing signs of the religions proper, although they deeply differ from them” (Tillich 1946: 82). For example, Tillich refers fascism and communism to *quasi-religions*, because he believes that they are “radicalizations and transformations of nationalism and socialism, respectively, and both have, though not entirely, a truly religious potential. In fascism and communism, national and social interests are raised to an unlimited boundary. In themselves, the national and social interests are of high value and worthy to give life for them, but neither one nor another interest in essence is not an unconditional interest” (Tillich 1946: 83).

The nation and the ideal society have become “gods” for the most striking examples of modern *quasi-religions*, to which Tillich refers the ideologies of fascism and communism. The researcher observes that fascism and German Nazism are the most generalized varieties of nationalism, because if a nation is of the marginal interest to somebody, the name of the nation becomes a sacred name and the nation itself is endowed with divine qualities which far exceed the real life and life of the nation (Tillich 1995: 161). At the same time, Paul Tillich places the responsibility for the distortion of ethnic consciousness on the shoulders of secularism, stating that “nationalism in the modern sense of the word could have emerged only when secular criticism separated the former unity of religious sanctification and group self-affirmation,

religion was supplanted and the empty place was replaced by the national idea as a marginal interest” (Tillich 1995: 133).

According to Tillich, the primary basis of any religion is “a state of obsession with the marginal interest, in relation to which all other interests are nonessential and which contains the answer to the question about the meaning of our life”. Everything that becomes a matter of marginal interest turns into some kind of god. This is the basis for religious spiritual formations, *quasi-religions*, in which the true boundary reality is replaced by ordinary realities, such as nation, science, a particular form or state of society, a human condition, the higher ideal of humanity, etc., which in this case are regarded as divine, as it has already been mentioned before.

Therefore the religion is an expression of true belief, and the *quasi-religion* represents metamorphoses of the replaced belief. But at the same time they are also induced by limit interest. Significant merit of P. Tillich is that he specified the concept of „pseudo-religion” introduced by his predecessor, J. Wach, for the first time proposing to distinguish it from the notion of “*quasi-religion*”: “Sometimes what I call *quasi-religions*, they call pseudo-religions, but this is inaccurate, as and unfair. »Pseudo« indicates the expected but deceptive similarity, and »*quasi*« indicates genuine similarity – not expected, but that which is based on the identity of some parties” (Tillich 1963). Under the influence of “extreme interest” a person has a desire for certain objects that can “turn into a god”, which characterizes the *quasi-religions* by Tillich.

Among other things, Tillich distinguishes still such a type of *quasi-religions* as liberal humanistic *quasi-religions*. In this type of *quasi-religious* freedom, civil rights, the autonomy of science can be the subject of boundary interest. *Quasi-religious* character, in his opinion, is obviously inherent in “liberal humanism”.

According to another prominent religious scholar Ninian Smart, there are other secular ideologies that are less similar to traditional religions until they seek to seize the symbols of power. A typical example of this philosophy is a scientific humanism that supports human and democratic values, highlights science as a source of knowledge, renounces religion (especially from Jewish and Christian theism) and considers the human person as the maximum value. For scientific humanism, N. Smart relates, for example, the systems of B. Russell, S. Freud, C.G. Jung and J.-P. Sartre. Although scientific humanism should not necessarily embody itself as a typical religious system, it still has all the dimensions characteristic of religions (Smart 1998).

P. Tillich mentioned by us earlier allows existence and other kinds of *quasi-religions*. Limit interest can be turned on success expressed in a high social status or to economic success. “Success – god of many people in the western culture which is extremely based on the competition and it works as any limit interest has to work: it requires unconditional return to the laws even if for the sake of it is necessary to sacrifice the real human relations, personal beliefs, etc” (Tillich 1963).

Let us turn to the question of the dialectic of religion and *quasi-religion*, as Tillich understood it. Aside from common grounds such as faith, marginal interest, they have a number of commonalities. In one of his works, Tillich defined religion as “the sphere of symbols, rituals and institutions. “Religious symbols (myths), rituals and institutions emerge because “the spirit needs incarnation to become real (effective)”. Thus, this creativity of spirit is manifested in *quasi-religious* incarnations: “Today we know that there is a secular myth. Today we know that there is a secular cult. Totalitarian movements introduced both to us. Their enormous power was that they transformed ordinary concepts and people into myth, and ordinary events into rituals; in this way they have come to grips with other myths and rituals, religious and secular” (Roberts 1995). Common to religion and *quasi-religion* mythological and ritual elements “never get lost” and are present even in the “most secularized forms of *quasi-religions*”.

P. Tillich expresses the idea that in secular societies religion and *quasi-religion* always go hand in hand. Only in a totally religious society there are no *quasi-religions*. But has there ever been a truly totally religious society in history? Consequently, the transcendental (marginal) reality itself is the most important criterion for distinguishing between religions and *quasi-religions*: the nature of this religion is due to the transcendental foundation, whereas the essence of *quasi-religion* determines a kind of individual reality that is built into a rank of higher value or a content-forming beginning. Obviously, however, that the existence of such a transcendental reality cannot be subjected to scientific verification and therefore is a matter of faith.

One of P. Tillich’s followers, J. Smith, argues that *quasi-religions* are characterized by the alienation and the distortion (corruption) of religious ideals or their transformation into a certain “surrogate”. However, the

researcher emphasizes that the term “*quasi-religion*” does not have negative connotations, it only affects the structural and functional similarity: the term “*quasi-religion*” is opposed by the author of the term “*pseudo-religion*”, which, in his opinion, has a shame of humiliating and disparaging (Smith 1994: 121).

In 1994, John Smith published a book, *Quasi-Religion: Humanism, Marxism, and Nationalism*. He uses in his study both the concept of “marginal interest” borrowed from Tillich and the concept of “numinous”, introduced by R. Otto. “Marginal interest” is replaced in J. Smith by the term „ultimate allegiance”. Smith distinguishes between “proper religion” and “*quasi-religion*.” Significant signs of “proper religion” imply the existence of a religious limit; recognition of a person’s difficult situation (alienation, etc.); search for a deliverer or any way to change this situation. From the perspective of the researcher such soteriological structure must be present in all religions. And the object of loyalty and devotion for humanists, Marxists, nationalists must be finite and conditioned.

Other scientists – A. Greil and D. Rudy understand *quasi-religions* as “phenomena that consciously appear on the verge between sacral and secular”, and they consider this phenomenon quite common in the modern world. *Quasi-religions* are organizations that consider themselves or are perceived as sort of religious (Greil, Rudy 1990: 219).

There are two most important features that at the same time point to the similarity of *quasi-religions* with traditional religions. From the point of view of A. Greil and D. Rudy, this is, firstly, an organizational dynamics similar to religious institutions, but without belief in supernatural, and secondly, *quasi-religions* presuppose the appearance of some “limiting interests” of human existence.

All the *quasi-religious* organizations considered by A. Greil unite if not real, then *positioned scientific substantiation*. All the *quasi-religious* organizations see their main objective in fulfilling *the therapeutic function*. That is, at the level of doctrine, and at the level of practice, *quasi-religions*, from the point of view of A. Greil, *try to help people improve their lives*. In part, this can be compared with the compensatory function that is characteristic of religion, many of which are written by religious scholars.

All this allows Greil and Rudy to conclude that all *quasi-religious* organizations can be characterized as *Identity Transformation Organizations* (ITO) (Greil, Rudy 1990: 48). From the perspective of researchers, all organizations that try to change a person have a number of common features, regardless of whether they are explicitly religious.

Thus, A. Greil attributes to the category of *quasi-religions* any associations that seek to radically change the former identity, outlook and lifestyle of their participants, regardless of the presence or absence of any similarity to the usual features of religion. Like a cocoon, transforming the identity of the organization “are closed by a protective shell to protect the process of transformation from external influences” (Greil, Rudy 1984: 263). These organizations are trying *to seal the individual within the organization*, so that it was precisely surrounded by such interpretations of a situation that is suitable for the formation of his new identity (Greil, Rudy 1989: 48). Such functioning of the organization as a social cocoon, undoubtedly, for a particular individual leads to the awareness and experience of the group’s power, identification of its interests with the interests of the group, the subordination of its own Ego organization. It must be agreed with the aforementioned researchers that reverence in relation to the organization inevitably finds its expression in the concepts of supernatural.

As an example of such modern organizations, in addition to the mentioned therapeutic groups, support groups, etc., we can also include to *quasi-religious* numerous groups of personal or professional growth, spiritic or magic circles, groups of healthy eating and vegetarianism, network marketing organization, etc. For example, the movement for “Eating ethically” or the movement for animal rights, Amway or Herbalife. Also under the “umbrella” of the term “*quasi-religion*”, researchers include astrology, occultism, 12 steps program, Environment-mentality, and various forms of the New Age. And sometimes even sports, environment-mentality, rock music, television, therapy and healing groups. According to the authors, there are many examples of *quasi-religions* and among various movements within the framework of the New Age movement.

Quasi-religious practices and quasi-religious movements

Let’s take a closer look at the activities of some movements that are *quasi-religious* in all respects. It will be about an informal formation, i.e. supporters of Apple products, and a formal organization, i.e. Amway. British

neurologists have shown in the BBC documentary that the brain of Apple fans is stimulated by Apple's visuals just as the brains of believers are stimulated by religious images. What is it about a company that makes people so emotionally attached to it? Video from the opening of the company's new store showcased hordes of Apple fans that were standing all night long, while staffs were cheering up customers (and themselves) with some kind of evangelical delight, religious sentiment.

One of the Apple fans states that he thinks about Apple 24 hours a day. A team of neurologists examined his brain during magnetic resonance imaging to understand how his brain responds to images of Apple and non-Apple products. According to information from neurologists, tomography showed that there are marked differences in the reaction of that person to different products. Earlier, scientists studied the brains of believers, and they found that "Apple products excite the same brain areas as religious images in believers".

"It sort of hints to us that big brands use, or rather, exploit, the brain areas that have evolved to cultivate religion," says one of the scientists. In addition, there are many *quasi*-religious visuals in Apple stores ranging from store floor, numerous arches, and small altars (where products are displayed). Many shops resemble places of worship, even cathedrals. And, of course, some fans mention Steve Jobs calling him "Messiah".

Having found themselves in the "happy family" of another *quasi*-religious entity, i.e. Amway, newly-minted followers are quick to figure out the main secret of the Amway cult: it's much easier and more profitable not to sell goods, but to build a pyramid and make money recruiting new distributors. They become focused on the "success" that is like deity for them.

In addition to attending seminars the "correct" distributor is required to order \$ 200 worth of goods each month. As a rule, he himself uses all these shampoos, vitamins and cleansing concentrates, and he devotes all his strength and free time to creating a "bottom line" in the hope of at least getting to the Directive. Very soon, this desire becomes an *idée fixe*, a form of religious suggestion: a person cannot talk about anything except "Business", his communication, even with friends and relatives, is almost always reduced to discussing Amway's perspectives and subconscious attempts to engage them in business. If friends and relatives do not show proper interest in these topics, there is a complete rejection: the Amway's representative cuts old ties, divorces and finds comfort in his new "family" of like-minded people.

It is interesting that, according to the calculations of independent experts, only three percent of distributors manage to rise to the level of the Directive in the share. The rest not only do not earn decent money, but also waste all their savings on the cult of "Amway". After numerous meetings and gatherings, the consciousness of the supporters of the "Amway" cult is directed to only one action: "Go and sell – only in such a way you will achieve your dream!".

Despite the variety of forms of organization, practices, and beliefs, from the perspective of sociologists, none of these groups falls within the American everyday understanding of the term "religion". Not all *quasi*-religious movements have an idea of gods. However, all *quasi*-religious organizations considered by A. Grail are united by, if not real, then positioned scientific validity. In addition, all *quasi*-religious organizations see their basic purpose in fulfilling a therapeutic function. That is, from the point of view of A. Grail, both at the level of doctrine and the level of practice of *quasi*-religion they try to help people to improve their lives.

The American authors also emphasize the pragmatism peculiar to members of *quasi*-religions. But, in spite of the fact that practical improvement of the individual is their main goal, usually is also approved, as has to lead spiritual growth to an exit out of identity limits that is also necessary for achievement of this purpose (for this purpose and various practitioners, meditations, etc. are applied).

One more characteristic feature of *quasi*-religions is an entertainment element. It often connects them with mass culture. However, though they have also no uncompromising gravity traditional religions, but also not just entertainment. This interlacing of gravity and an entertaining element just also is the key to their viability.

So, on the one hand, sociologists of religion suggest that there is a non-religious dimension of the sacred. For example, music, sports, and politics can serve as alternative sources of the sacred. And if we distinguish two basic functions of religion, that is giving meaning and belonging (affiliation), and then they are to a certain extent performed by any cultural institute. Exactly such non-religious sources of sacred meanings fall under the definition of "*quasi*-religion." These include the value systems mentioned above, such as environmental concerns, groups of mutual aid and healthy eating, etc., as well as boundary phenomena that religious studies

traditionally investigate, but sometimes have difficulties in their describing and classifying, such as New Age movements or modern magic. These phenomena, from our point of view, can be studied using the concept of “quasi-religion”, which will remove the problem of their classification among religions, which is opposed to by both the holders of these worldviews and representatives of traditional religions.

From the point of view of religious studies, it can be argued that Greil understands under the *quasi-religious* groups that manifest themselves as religious, if we apply the essential or functional definitions of religion, but society or the group itself does not recognize its religious nature.

Conclusion

Thus, *quasi-religions* imply the phenomena of modern spiritual life that combine features inherent in both religious and non-religious movements that do not correspond to the daily understanding of religion, but for the study of which it is possible and necessary to apply religious approaches.

In the author's opinion, *quasi-religions* are organizations that don't position themselves as religious but can be perceived as religious in a certain extent. For example, *quasi-religions* include groups of mutual support as well as numerous groups of personal or professional growth, spiritic or witch clubs, groups of healthy eating and vegetarianism, network marketing organizations (for example, Amway) and even the community of Apple brand admirers. All *quasi-religious* organizations can be characterized as Identity Transformation Organizations.

So, it should be noted that “*quasi-religion*” is a form of the secular ideological designs which are characterized by the direction of limit interest of their adherents (members, participants, etc.) in secular objects, such as nation, science, a special form or a condition of society, the highest ideal of mankind, the highest steps of self-development of the person or his material well-being which often are considered as divine. These are phenomena which consciously arise on border between sacral and secular, however most often quite secular organization, very much reminds religious communities in a form or content of the activity. They are characterized are positioned by scientific validity of the existence, and a basic kernel is the attempt to help people to improve their life in many key areas and in fact are the organizations which try to transform identity of the person, to subordinate her to the Ego organization, to achieve full identification of own interests of the personality with the interests of group.

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