Invented religions and the conceptualization of religion in a highly secular society: The Jedi religion and the Church of Beer in the Czech context

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Abstract

This study illustrates the need to develop efforts that define scientific terms, namely, 'religion'. Despite the fact that such efforts may seem to be practically unattainable, current phenomena testify to the need to continually improve standardized scholarly terminology (such as Invented Religion, Parody Religion). Using specific material (of new religious phenomena in the Czech Republic, specifically the Jedi religion and the Church of Beer), the study identifies several key ambiguities stemming from the cultural and social context in which both contemporary new religions and academic study of religions coexist. The study concludes that in a highly secular society, where the continuity of religious memory is disrupted (as in the Czech Republic), the academic study of religions plays an important role, functioning as an authority for the decision-making of state institutions.

Keywords

A highly secular society, invented religion, Jediism, parody religion, religious memory, the Church of Beer, the Czech Republic

Introduction

Czech society displays a low level of religiosity in many respects. The findings of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) survey and the European Values Study (EVS) as well as census results illustrate this fact. Both Czech authors (e.g., Hamplová and Nešpor, 2009; Havlíček, 2006; Havlíček and Lužný, 2013; Lužný and Navrátilová,

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2001; Nešpor, 2010; Váně et al., 2012) and foreign authors (e.g., Ančić and Zrinščak, 2012; Borowik, 2006; Lambert, 2006; Müller, 2009, 2011; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Pollack, 2003) have commented on the low level of religiosity and religious laxness and the high amount of secularization in Czech society (as well as in Lithuania, Estonia and the eastern part of Germany). The EVS results demonstrate that belief in God as a person decreased from 12 to 6 percent in the Czech Republic between 1990 and 1999 (similar to Lithuania's decrease from 12% to 8%), whereas in neighbouring, equally post-communist Poland, there was an increase from 79 to 82 percent (Pollack, 2008: 178). The Czech Republic, along with Estonia, is therefore an example of 'extremely high non-confessional identification' (Zrinščak, 2004: 229) and a 'unique case of secularization' (Froese, 2005: 270).

Even for those who follow, however, developments on the contemporary Czech religious scene more closely, two controversial events in recent years may be surprising. During the 2011 census, the media reported on an organized group of people who had decided to declare their religion as Jediism on the census form. A Facebook group called '*Na sčítání lidu 2011 napíšu do svého náboženského vyznání víru Jedi*' [On the 2011 census I'll fill in my religion as Jedi] was created. It had more than 30,000 members in 2011. As a result of this campaign, a total of 15,070 people declared Jediism as their 'religion' on the census form. At first glance, this may seem a low number, but when compared with other religions, it is not a negligible result. Using the census data to create a scale of the largest religious groups in the Czech Republic, Jediism would score the fifth place – following the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, the Czechoslovak Hussite Church and the Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands.

These results should not be viewed as an expression of the growing popularity of a new religion which could over the course of a few years or decades become the prevalent faith in the Czech Republic. Although at first glimpse it might seem that the Czech population, despite its secular nature (or perhaps due to it), may be susceptible to such religious experiments and that it could realize its latent religiosity in this futuristic version of spirituality, such developments do not appear to be very likely. Czech society is merely following the example of other countries – as 2001 census data demonstrate, a similar growth in the Jedi religion has occurred in other countries as well (e.g. in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Great Britain) (Lewis, 2004). It is probable, however, that the development in the Czech Republic will be similar to that in other countries, where a decrease occurred in the following censuses – in the 2011 UK census, the Jedi religion was declared by 176,632 people (0.3%) compared to 390,127 (0.7%) in 2001; a similar situation occurred in Canada, where the number decreased from approximately 20,000 in 2001 to approximately 9000 in 2011. In contrast, the number of Jediists seems to be relatively stable (ca. 0.4%–0.3 %) in Australia (Davidsen, 2017; Singler, 2014; Voas, 2012).

In the Czech Republic, as a consequence of the relative success of Jediism in the census, an initiative to establish an official structure and to officially register this structure as a religious organization was launched.

Another similar occurrence was the attempt to officially register the 'Church of Beer' (in Czech *Pivní církev*). The media reported on these efforts in a manner similar to how they reported on Jediism – that it was a joke and the adherents of these religions were not serious.

These cases clearly illustrate a basic principle that the liberal state and the academic study of religion share. This principle is respect for the religious faith of individuals and groups and respect for the value of religious freedom. In other words, the academic study of religion and the modern liberal state share a common ideological foundation in terms of respect for freedom of belief, even if this belief seems very bizarre to most people.

Jediism and the Church of Beer pose several important questions and dilemmas for the academic community studying religions (i.e. primarily for researchers in the fields of religion studies, sociology and cultural anthropology), illustrating the ambivalence of today's (post)modern society and the difficulty of successfully and adequately dealing with such ambivalence in academic studies. The most important and difficult task is answering the question of what is religion and who is entitled to answer this question.

This study draws from two broad theoretical concepts: modernization theory and the concept of cultural memory. It also takes into account the debate on the place of religion in a consumer society, a frequent area of focus for researchers studying such phenomena. This study attempts to interconnect the concepts of 'invented religion' (Cusack, 2010, 2013), 'hyper-real religion' (Possamai, 2003; Possamai and Lee, 2011) and cultural (or more specifically religious) memory (Halbwachs, Assmann and others). The study is based on the perspective which sees religion as well as the academic study of religion, as connected with the discourse and practice of power, that is, with a specific sociocultural situation (as proposed, for example, in Asad, 1993; Wijsen and Stuckrad, 2006; and others).

The aim of this study is to analyse specific forms of new religions viewed as expressions of a culture in which cultural memory has been weakened by modernization. These new forms of religion are not only results of certain sociocultural conditions, but they also challenge the theoretical and methodological foundations of the academic study of religion. My basic thesis is that specific sociocultural conditions, including the configuration of religions (e.g. the relationship between the state and religion, or the predominant ideology) under these conditions, are directly reflected in the methodology of social sciences that deal with religion.

Although the study is quite theoretical, empirical material has been used to illustrate the analysed problems (ambiguities) that are associated with the definition of 'religion'. General ambiguities have been illustrated using the example of two new religious groups – the Jedi religion and the Church of Beer. Different genres were used for the analysis: mainly web pages and printed texts. In addition, an interview with a representative of the Church of Beer was conducted, but its content was not directly used in the study (in the form of citations) with regard to research ethics. The interview helped, however, at reaching a better understanding of the context of the Church of Beer's efforts to register with the state. The author's experience as an expert consultant in this area was also used in the study, but specific information from the individual proceedings could not be explicitly mentioned in the text, as this is against the rules for expert consultants.

Authority and ambivalence in amnestic modernity – theoretical bases

In many regards, modernity theories vary in their perspectives as well as in their conclusions (whether thinking about the classical sociological theories of Max Weber, Karl

Marx, Emil Durkheim or Georg Simmel, or the contemporary theories of Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Jurgen Habermas, George Ritzer, Ronald Inglehart, Frederic Jameson, Immanuel Wallerstein, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Zygmunt Bauman or Mike Featherstone), but they also concur on many significant points. Thus, here I shall present in brief a few select characteristics of the current phase of modernity that are important for the topic at hand.

Above all, a radical recognition of differentness has emerged (a recognition of the right to be different), and the idea of universalistic, legitimizing 'grand narratives' has collapsed (Lyotard). We therefore find ourselves in a state where the real plurality of lifeworlds is reflected upon, and this plurality is no longer significantly doubted; the social system (law, politics, education, culture, including religious life, etc.) is built upon the principle of the recognition of the right to be special. This is manifested in the predominant discourse, which affects all areas of life – a specific example being respect for cultural differences (the principle of cultural relativism) and the right to self-expression. Of course, this condition does not mean (and considering the nature of contemporary society cannot mean) the universal and unifying legitimization of ideas, attitudes and lifeworlds (e.g. through universalist multiculturalism). Therefore, an integral part of this condition is its opposition, that is, criticism from traditionalist and fundamentalist individuals and movements. These critics rightfully point out that the radical recognition of plurality and difference can lead (and is leading) to the relativization of all values and worldviews, and thus to the loss of a fixed point and a central or dominant authority.

In addition, there has been a radicalization of the basic principles of modernity in the current phase of modernity: rationality, reflexivity and individualization. Rationalization leads to the domination of ends-based rational action that gradually pushes out values-based rational action (although both forms of action are rational) and introduces a calculating element to social action. This change, in turn, significantly supports reflexivity, as calculation involves the conscious consideration of various aspects of action, including considering the context of action and the consequences of action. Moreover, reflexivity adds into the mix an effort to consider (at least hypothetically) unintended consequences and thus supports imagination, and of course particularizes the legitimacy of such action. It is also clear that the reflexive cannot be without the rational and that there can be no rationalization and reflexivity without individualization. These three concepts are elements, factors or aspects of the contemporary phase of modern society that are interdependent and act together. As Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman and others have pointed out in their works, people in such a society are under constant pressure to make choices (both rational and reflexive), which are based on individual preferences and worldviews (or their hybrid forms), and one's way of life, as well as one's entire life history (biography), becomes an individual reflexive project (e.g. Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992, 2010; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Plurality and individualization lead to greater insecurity because plurality and individualization cannot provide a firm foundation for the plausibility of any definition of reality. At the same time, however, it is clear that the individual or individuals as well as a social group or groups need some kind of agreement as to what is real (they must create a certain worldview) and they need conditions (structures) under which they can confirm this concept of the real. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their classic

book *The Social Construction of Reality* call this social foundation for preserving an image of reality a plausibility structure (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 174–182). This confirmation does not apply, however, to one's worldview as a whole, but to its individual parts or conglomerates thereof. In other words, the worldview of an individual or group does not consist of an internally coherent whole, and it is not possible for it as a whole to be made legitimate or credible – confirming its credibility and achieving legitimacy are possible only partially and are arbitrary. Worldviews are more modular in nature – based on current needs, the parts of the worldview that are at the moment understood as legitimate are activated.

This clearly illustrates the disunity of life conditions (and their reflection) in contemporary modern society. The modular nature of the worldview means that individual modules and their components do not need to create a congruent whole and may be in principle ambivalent. This ambivalence, however, is only fulfilled 'in principle', that is, without considering concrete situations and context. In other words, based on a given situation, only one module or its components are used, which does not elicit ambivalence (in the given situation it is always necessary to make a clear decision – 'to marry a certain woman', 'to turn left', 'to buy a bottle of a certain type of wine'). Ambivalence arises only upon reflection on this action or decision.

The consequences of the uncertain nature of a pluralistic and individualized society for religion are clear. The result is the disruption of the legitimizing force of religious memory, as religious memory is pluralized and individualized, and its ability to credibly connect the past with the present is weakened. A plurality of memories, without the support of power structures and firmly established authority, leads to a culture without memory, that is, to a situation where elements of the past can be randomly reconfigured without regard for their internal continuity and interconnections. Religious memories are thus internally ambivalent, lead to new ambivalences, or they are the results of already existing ones.

The first ambivalence: respect for religious freedom and its impact on the academic study of religions

Liberalism (based on the assumption of individual rights and freedoms) and secularism (guaranteeing the separation between church and state) are two of the basic principles upon which the modern state is built. Both of these ideas encompass the principle of religious freedom, which in practice means that every individual (either separately or organized in groups) may (but does not have to) believe in any religion. He or she may therefore believe in and practice a religion that other people do not consider to be a religion (for many reasons) or even a religion that elicits aversion in other people.

The thorough application of respect for religious freedom should lead to completely giving up on judging the 'religiousness' or 'non-religiousness' of the given activities or teachings and to leaving everything up to the declarations of the people who do these activities, or consider a certain teaching to be true, or who declare themselves to be adherents of the given activity or teaching. This would mean being completely engulfed by the emic approach – that is, by viewing things from the perspective of social actors.

In other words, if someone says that he believes our universe is guided by the Flying Spaghetti Monster and that this opinion is a 'religion', then we have no other choice but to respect this opinion and accept it as legitimate, just as if someone else says that her religion is based on worshiping a single, all-powerful God, who created the world in 6 days and who wants to save us all with His love.

It is a legitimate question to ask why, when studying religion, should we as scholars view things from the actor's perspective (the emic approach) and use it as the basis upon which we create an analytical concept of religion. Should we view both of the above declarations of religiosity made by social actors equally? Should this also be the case especially when both sides are in opposition to each other, denying one another's claim to religiosity and rejecting the legitimacy of the other side's opinion?

The magic of anthropology of religion, or rather its basic attribute, consists in the art of switching between different perspectives (including the perspective of various actors); this does not mean, however, absolute deference to the emic approach and the loss of the researcher's own analytical, critical and reflexive thinking. The art of the emic approach certainly is part and parcel of postcolonial anthropology and is certainly a major advantage of an anti-positivist, interpretive (understanding) research methodology. It cannot, however, mean a conscious and targeted resignation of one's own scholarly, and therefore etic, opinion. Another question arises here though: What if our own opinion (even if it is based on solid research) is in conflict with the principle of religious freedom? Imagine a situation where an anthropologist comes to the conclusion that what the actors themselves consider a religion is not a religion. In contrast, can social science examine a phenomenon from a religious perspective even if the actors involved do not view it as a religion (i.e. they refuse to call it a religion and speak instead of a 'path', 'an effort at self-understanding and self-improvement' or 'a way of life')? Is this a particular example of the discursive power of science and the asymmetry about which Latour (1993) speaks critically?

In this context, let us examine Czech Jediism. The website www.jediismus.cz defines Jediism as a 'spiritual movement based on the philosophy of the Jedi knights', which 'may be perceived as a life philosophy, or as a religion. Opinions about which is better vary, so therefore it is good to guide yourself based on your own opinions and ideas' (*Úvod*, 2012). The creators of this website, fully in the spirit of the postmodern approach drawing from the reality of religious plurality and in the spirit of the late-modern principle of individualization, leave the decision-making up to every single actor and do not particularly emphasize the use of the term 'religion' (they speak more about a 'spiritual movement' and a 'life philosophy'). They do not assert the exclusivity of this movement and declare that 'we definitely do not want to convince anyone that Jediism is the only true path. It is just one path which a person may travel along' (*Úvod*, 2012).

From this perspective, Jediism falls precisely under the New Age category in which, thanks to religious (or spiritual) bricolage, elements of various religions are combined, with the key theme being self-understanding and self-development, or rather finding and understanding latent powers and potencies and subsequently (or concurrently) developing them (Heelas, 1996 and others). The following proclamation, contained on the website's introductory page, is crucial:

The basic elements of Jediism are belief in the Force and living up to the code. In Jediism the Force is understood as being made up of three aspects. The Personal Force, which determines the energy of a given person (aura), the Living Force created by all living creatures, which permeates all things, and the All-Unifying Force which determines everyone's fate. In other religions, the All-Unifying Force is called God, Goddess, Gods, the Devil, Chi, Energy, etc. In our opinion the name is not important, and thus we simply believe in the Force. The Force guides us, helps us, and reveals some of life's secrets. The code consists of a few important fundamentals that every Jedi must abide by. Other elements are the development of qualities and abilities that every Jedi should have and the improvement of various skills that could come in handy in life. Because we view Jediism as a means of self-improvement, you will also find on these pages information about magic, philosophy, psychology, healthy lifestyles and other things. (*Úvod*, 2012)

Symptomatic of this type of 'religiosity' or 'creation of religion' is a situation where the individual (either alone or in a group) perceives elements of the surrounding world (including cultural and religious elements) as freely 'floating' in space, without links to any clear and defining context (detraditionalization), uses these elements in a creative (imaginative) manner and assembles them into new configurations (bricolage). It is clear that this approach to religion can be applied primarily in environments and situations in which cultural (and religious) memory has been weakened, authority has been weakened and where the significance of tradition has decreased. Religion, or rather DIY religion, has become an integral part of consumer culture, and not just as an object to be manipulated, but also as the result of such manipulation (creation). Elements of mass consumer culture, such as books, television, films and the Internet, have become an important source for creating religion. The inevitable result (one of many) is the shattering of the legitimacy of using the term 'religion' because this term carries with it a certain cultural heritage and calls up its dominant traditional use, although what this term currently entails (i.e. 'religion') has changed significantly. The question remains, however, whether changes in what this term entails are so fundamental that we have to fully take on the emic approach and reject the etic term religion as outdated.

The self-portrayals of the creators of www.jediismus.ic.cz are illustrative. The first person is Jana /Jane/, who makes the following claims about herself:

My name is Jana, I am 20, and I live in a small village a few km from Brno. I am interested in everything that involves perception, dreams, auras, Jediism, psychology, philosophy, history, magic, nature, the people around me and people from different cultures, drawing, reading (sometimes I read with my legs up and notice it after a while :), writing stories, music, family and mainly my friends. My dream is to use the Force to understand the world and help it. I'd say about myself that I am an introverted optimist. My favourite food is great granny's potato pancakes (even though gramps's are not so bad either :), I like dandelions, cartoons (mainly Krakonoš), Mr. Bean, and Denmark (probably because in winter 2001 I fell into the sea there and my shoes dried for two days and I cleaned my trousers with paper tissues :) I like to go to the theatre, take photographs, ice skate, swim and run around in the mountains :) I honour the Jedi code and therefore may the Force be with you. . . :).

The second person is Filip, whose statement reveals a more explicit identification with religion:

My name is Filip, I am 20, and I live in Pardubice. I began to be interested in magic when I was about 15. I unconsciously used intuition and telepathy and after a while realized what exactly that was. I began to seek out information about magic and found my way to Wicca. I was quite captivated by it and began to read all kinds of websites and books. Since then I have studied Wicca as well as magic and other fields. I was particularly captivated by mediation, trance, astral projection, lucid dreaming, perception of energies, auras, and chakras, telepathy, telekinesis and other things. After about a year and a half, when I had already seen some Star Wars movies for perhaps the millionth time, I began to think about the Jedi knights. About their composure, calmness and abilities. It occurred to me that there must be some 'madman' :) who had the idea to take this philosophy and make a real religion out of Jediism. I began to look for information, at first on Wikipedia (the English version), where I learned that this religion really does exist and what's more that it had hundreds of thousands of followers. It wasn't a problem to find more pages and I began to study intensively everything I came across . . . (*O nás*, 2012)

What can be concluded from the above proclamations made by the creators of the main Czech Jediism websites? They are (a) young people, who (b) were most likely brought up in a non-religious environment, (c) do not feel the need to come to terms with existing religious traditions, (d) are interested in 'mysterious' and unknown sides of existence, (e) want to understand the world around them and (f) want to help this world, and (g) their image of the world, including religion, is created randomly according to whatever they had access to (bricolage). In other words, religious de-monopolization and pluralism allow practically anyone to become a 'religious' leader; at the same time, it is apparent that the importance of the 'layperson' has grown significantly and the influence of 'religious professionals' (i.e. trained representatives of a given religious hierarchy) has been put on the back burner.

This fact means a growing uncertainty, for applying the emic approach where the activities and statements of actors are equal in the eyes of the anthropologist, and also means giving up on a more general, systemic analysis; the goal becomes to reconstruct the actor's world. It is apparent, however, that the actions of all the actors (including their statements) have the same social impact and that the identical activity of two different actors has differing results. It is therefore an illusion that all social actors' activities and statements are equal. Cultural anthropology can thus be viewed as a way to acquire the ability to uncover this illusion and reveal hidden motifs and determinants of human behaviour. Without the etic approach, however, all this is impossible. Should we then take the phenomenon of 'Jediism' as seriously as possible? The answer is simple: yes, certainly. In order to do so, however, we need to deal with another problem – defining 'religion'.

The second ambivalence: 'what is religion?'

With all due respect to the emic approach, I do not assume that social actors' proclamations of their religiosity should be the only criterion for understanding certain cultural phenomena as religion. In order to consider a particular phenomenon, whether physical or verbal, as 'religious', at least a working concept of 'religion' is needed.

It is therefore apparent that we cannot avoid providing some kind of definition (although it will certainly not be generally valid and shared by all). Let us try to illustrate the disunity of scholarship on religion by providing at least the three most commonly mentioned

textbook examples of definitions of religion. First, we (along with Emil Durkheim) could define religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim, 1995: 44). A second definition is offered by Milton Yinger (1970), who understands religion as

> a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human associations. The quality of being religious, seen from the individual point of view, implies two things: first, a belief that evil, pain, bewilderment, and injustice are fundamental facts of existence; and, second, a set of practices and related sanctified beliefs that express a conviction that man can ultimately be saved from those facts. (p.7)

Or we can take the position of Clifford Geertz and view religion as

> 1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, 1993: 90)

These three definitions are well known; now let us try to apply them to the Jedi religion and the Church of Beer.

According to the first definition of religion, some elements of faith and theology (i.e. what people believe in), elements of religious behaviour (rituals, religious acts, songs, prayers, etc.) and collective forms (i.e. more-or-less institutionalized relationships, forms of communication, organizational structures, networks, etc.) must be present, or more simply, we need to study what people believe in, how they behave and how they join together. At the same time, a key element to religion here is sacred things, towards which members of a given community behave significantly differently (taboos, worship) than to other things. Thus, at the core of the 'religiosity' of a given phenomenon (such as a community) lies the concept of the 'sacred'.

If we view Jediism from this vantage point, we can state that its core teaching is the idea that a superhuman (and thus superindividual) universal 'Force' exists:

> The Force is an energy that creates everything, binds everything, and creates balance among all beings. It is the energy of every living being as well as of every non-living entity. We can call this energy God, Goddess, the Universe, Energy, Love, the Highest Principle, . . . whatever we want to. For the Force contains all, it cannot be described, grasped, or even comprehended. We therefore use the word 'force' due to its relative emotional neutrality. The Force is perceived very individually. May everyone find their own path to the Force and the Force will join our paths into one. (*Manifest Společenství Cesty Síly*, 2012)

This description of the 'Force' demonstrates the hierarchical place of human beings under this force and enables this 'Force' to be understood as a transcendental power. For this reason, Jediism might be construed as a religion.

There is no such element of the sacred or the transcendental, in contrast, in the Church of Beer. At first glance, it might seem that beer could be the sacred element that the members of the Church of Beer are convinced is a 'holy' drink, but not a 'sacred' one. Beer is understood as a tool for relaxation and a means for people to meet:

> Fellow believers meet regularly in moments of rest in order to gain new strength together. Drinking beer has a beneficial effect in this regards and fellow believers are of the opinion that it is a holy drink, for it best calms the bodies and minds of people at times of rest and rouses them to exceptional performance in the future. (*Základní charakteristika Pivní církve*, n.d.)

This 'non-sacred' view of beer is commensurate with its consumption in commercial dining establishments and with the consumption of mass-produced beer. If members of this church truly viewed beer as a sacred drink, it is more than likely that they would produce this drink in some special way themselves and would consume it only in symbolic quantities. Although the Founding Document of the Church of Beer does speak about a 'Creator', it does so only very vaguely:

> A crucial element of the ontology of fellow believers is the immanent concept of the Creator. Fellow believers consider themselves to be creationists . . . Fellow believers reject the atheist concept of the creation of the world as a mere coincidence. They do not, however, personify the Creator, but view him as an intelligent, everpresent constant. (*Základní charakteristika Pivní církve*, n.d.)

Although the official theology of the Church of Beer (in its concepts of the Creator and the sacred) is not adequately articulated or described publicly, this fact is not evidence for doubting its religious nature. Nonetheless, if a basic assumption in this definition of religion is some kind of concept of the 'sacred' or the transcendent, then we can legitimately ask to what extent this concept should be explicit and comprehensive. And who determines this extent?

In order to meet the second definition of religion, there has to be an interest in the ultimate problems of human life in the teachings and practices of the given community and strategies for their universal (not only individual) solution. In addition, there must also be rituals that serve this 'strategy of ultimate victory'. In other words, from this perspective, the core of 'religiosity' is any concept of 'salvation' as a definitive solution to the ultimate problem of human existence (problems of overcoming human life's finiteness, that is, overcoming death, and questions about the existence of good and evil, that is, overcoming this duality or the ultimate victory of good over evil). The teachings of the Church of Beer that have been made public (and thus their only known teachings) do not contain these themes, and the main dualism of these teachings is the dichotomy of value-creating activities (in other words, work) and leisure activities, or rather the switching back and forth between the two. Members of the Church of Beer consider 'poorly spent relaxation time' to be something negative (read 'evil'), and they view drinking beer together as a way to regenerate the strength necessary for the 'effective creation of values':

> The teachings accepted by fellow believers . . . work with the concept of life as a cycle of 'work and reward' . . . This cycle of activities is performed in order to have a value-creating

activity followed by a leisure activity of the creator so that the entire cycle is quickly closed and restored. This is considered negative as it disturbs attributive harmony, and makes it impossible to meet the goals of the Creator, for he assigned man the task of effectively creating values because man is a value in himself. (*Základní charakteristika Pivní církve*, n.d.)

It is therefore apparent that the Church of Beer does not meet the second definition of religion either.

In contrast, Jediism displays characteristics of the second definition, although they are not always clear-cut. The concept of salvation and dealing with the ultimate problem of human existence are not fully explicit, although the duality between good and evil (the Light and the Dark) is linked to the concept of the Force, imbuing this duality with a superhuman, transcendental nature (although this duality is understood in terms of onto-logical monism as illusory, or rather, it is related to a limited point of view):

The Force is divided into two sides: the Light and the Dark. It is important, however, to realize that this division is merely our view, the view of people, a kind of concept, a tool, for grasping reality. The Force contains all values imaginable and at the same time does not distinguish between values; it cannot be objectively divided up. Nonetheless, what should guide our actions? We have therefore defined the Dark and Light Side of the Force. [. . .] The Dark Side of the Force are actions that cause harm and everything that leads to such actions. The actions of the Dark Side of the Force culminate in destruction, pain, suffering, unhappiness, and injury to others or those who commit them . . . The cause always lies within us, in qualities such as fear, anger, hatred, rage, envy, malice, laziness, pride, insatiability, egoism, selfishness, etc. These characteristics must be controlled, just like our actions. Jedis try to avoid the Dark Side and follow what is called the Light Side of the Force. The Light Side of the Force is actions that create and spread harmony and happiness all around, that do not hurt and do not destroy, as well as everything that leads to such actions. Actions of the Light Side require developing qualities including justice, patience, loyalty, generosity, honour, humility, empathy, courage, compassion, tolerance and respect . . . We identify the Dark Side with Evil and Evil with the Dark Side, whereas a synonym of the Light Side is the Good. The Dark Side is connected with negative energy and the Light with positive. Both energies are part of the Force, although it is important to realize that no 'part', no level of the Force can be negative or positive in itself. The Force is. (*Manifest Společenství Cesty Síly*, 2012)

Is, however, the language and style Jedis use to describe their beliefs a sufficient rea-son to recognize Jediism's religious nature?

For the third and final definition of religion, it is important to identify, in the teachings and practices of a community, the idea that the world has an order (or Order) from which one can derive how the life of an individual and of society should be organized. Religion thus functions as a 'model of *something*' and also as a 'model *for something*' with signifi-cant legitimizing and normative power and may serve as the framework of a lifestyle. It interconnects individual life episodes into a unified, meaningful whole. In light of the fact that the teachings and practices of the Church of Beer do not demonstrably substanti-ate the idea of a universal world order that could organize the lives of individuals and determine social and moral order, the Church of Beer cannot be considered a religion. References to the Creator, the rejection of the 'atheist concept of the creation of the world as a mere coincidence' or the idea of a 'cycle of activities performed in order' is not an

adequate basis for demonstrating the existence of the church's 'theology' or cosmology (or cosmogony).

In contrast, based on this definition, we can also identify a religious plane in Jediism's teachings, as Jediism contains instructions for proper behaviour and an order to the world. One of the principles of Jediism is to maintain 'the code'. Suggestions, instructions and proclamations for behaving properly appear in many places in Jediism's teachings and are related to a superhuman element (in this case, the 'Force'). The tenets of Jediism include the following:

> A Jedi knows, is, and works in keeping with the Force. A Jedi studies the Force, uses it, and helps increase it. A Jedi is guided, influenced and strengthened by the force, and also relies on it. / A Jedi maintains the code, or something similar that contains the same principles. / A Jedi must uphold the principles that derive from the qualities that determine who we are through action and words. Although once again they may be expressed in another form, they must remain in the heart of every Jedi. / A Jedi clings to individual freedom. Freedom is the trait of deciding for oneself. To deny somebody a choice is against what the Jedi stand for. / A Jedi only rejects violence, cruelty and similar punishments. / A Jedi recognizes democracy, both political and religious. / A Jedi does not just study Jediism and the Force but must learn about all parts of life as it may someday be useful. (Jediismus, 2012)

Applying the preceding arguments, we realize that this study has so far focused on the teachings of Jediism and the Church of Beer, or rather on some of the declared aspects of their teachings, and has neglected religious practice, particularly rituals. It is here that we specifically see the most distinctive and effective tool for evaluating the religiosity of a certain group of people. Simply stated, if jointly conducted rituals, which can be labelled 'religious', are absent in the life of a group that declares itself to be religious, the religious character of such a group is debatable. This statement requires further clarification (on at least two points). First, there is a need to differentiate between religious and non-religious rituals, for all social relations as well as many aspects in one's life as an individual are ritualized. Not all of these rituals are, however, necessarily of a religious nature. In order to identify the religious dimension of rituals, it is important to take into account all three of the definitions of religion discussed above at the very least. Second, religious rituals must display a certain regularity (e.g. one group ceremony per year is not enough) and they must significantly structure an individual's time throughout the day, the year and life (e.g. an individual or group; morning or evening prayers, meditation, or worship ceremonies; weekly attendance of group ceremonies; the celebration of various holidays throughout the year); a religious group must perform these rituals collectively (collective rituals are the most effective tool for creating and maintaining a group or individual's religious identity).

If this principle is applied to the current form of the Czech Church of Beer and Czech Jediism, it is apparent that both practically lack a ritual plane, as meeting (even regularly) and drinking beer cannot be considered a religious ritual, and wider social significance cannot be attributed to individuals training to develop the Force.

What if, however, the Church of Beer and Jediism represent a new form of religion (or religiosity) that does not necessarily correspond with traditional forms and which create the foundation for an academic definition of religion?

The third ambivalence: does religious change also require a change in the definition of religion?

In this article, I focused on two examples of efforts to legitimize a certain phenomenon: religion. The two cases differ greatly. The Church of Beer can be considered a 'parody religion' (just like the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster or Pastafarianism) – in other words, a religious joke. Religious parody should be viewed as a form of religious criticism in a given society, as parody belongs to the anthropology of the field of religion. The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster was created in response to the Kansas State Board of Education's decision to allow intelligent design (a new version of creationism) to be taught in high schools as a theory as equally valid as Darwin's theory of evolution. It reflects the specific situation of the culture wars currently being waged in the United States. The Church of Beer is, in contrast, a reflection of the specific conditions in Czech society, in which beer is thought of as a part of national traditions and in which traditional religion is on the decline.

The existence of groups such as Jediism that clearly have their roots in science-fiction (whether Scientology, on the one hand, or Heaven's Gate or Church of All Worlds, on the other) leads anthropologists of religion to attempt to categorize these phenomena. Markus Altena Davidsen has introduced, for example, the category of 'fiction-based religion' (Davidsen, 2013), which is a 'religion in which fictional texts are used as authoritative texts', with fiction defined as 'any literary narrative which is not intended by its author to refer to events which have taken place in the actual world prior to being entextualised' (Davidsen, 2013: 384). The religious aspect of these literary narratives stems from the action of supernatural agents and the consequences of this action in the real world. Religious narratives place supernatural agents in the real world and claim that the supernatural is real, whereas fictional narratives leave the supernatural in the fictional world. Most traditional religious narratives (myths, legends, etc.) proclaim a link to human history and are thus historical narratives. Such religions can then be called 'history-based religions'.

Apart from the concept of 'fiction-based religion', the other most influential concepts in the field are 'hyper-real religion' and 'invented religion'. Adam Possamai introduced the term 'hyper-real religion' into the contemporary debate on modern (or postmodern) forms of religion. He postulates that there has been growth in various forms of participation in religion and that there has been growth in 'ontological insecurity' (as a consequence of the late-modern reflexive condition), which has resulted in the creation of new, innovative spiritual networks. Possamai uses the 'term "hyper-real religions" to denote a specific twenty-first century style of innovative spirituality' that mixes 'elements of religious tradition with popular culture':

> These hyper-real religions are a simulacrum of a 'traditional' religion created partly out of popular culture; popular cultural symbols and narratives provide inspiration for believers/consumers. At one end of their spectrum can be found, for example, individuals rejecting institutionalized religions and practising Jediism as appropriated from the Star Wars movies, Matrixism from the Matrix trilogy, and neo-pagan groups using stories from The Lord of the Rings and the Harry Potter series. At the other end of the spectrum, practitioners still involved

in mainstream religions such as Christianity recount being influenced or inspired by, for example, The Da Vinci Code. (Possamai and Lee, 2011: 229)

Another attempt at categorizing these (perhaps 'borderline') forms of contemporary religiosity resulted in the concept of 'invented religion', which was introduced to the academic study of religion by Carole M. Cusack and elaborated in greater depth by other scholars (for instance, Taira, 2013). This is based on the idea that current forms of religion are influenced by three key elements of today's world: secularization, individualism and consumer culture:

> Invented religions are exercises of the imagination that have developed in a creative (though sometimes oppositional) partnership with the influential popular cultural narratives of the contemporary West, particularly film and science fiction. (Cusack, 2010: 7)

> Invented religions are an inevitable outcome of a society addicted to the consumption of novelties, in which the exercise of creativity and innovation in the development of products is rewarded by wealth and fame. Inventors and entrepreneurs became valued during the industrial revolution, when a stable agricultural society that had remained basically unchanged for centuries was transformed by new technologies that radically altered the life patterns of people. (Cusack, 2010: 18)

Invented religions are a new type of religion – they reject established ideological, historical and religious authority, as well as continuity with existing religious traditions: 'Invented religions also view fictions, the ludic and play as legitimate sources of ultimate meaning; in no sense inferior materials upon which to base a religion than factual accounts, attested experiences or historical events' (Cusack, 2013: 371). It is a type of religion 'that explicitly and transparently emphasises story, play and creativity, whether the religions are based on fiction is, ultimately, unimportant' (Cusack, 2013: 374).

Religious innovation has been occurring since humans have existed. Understandably, the academic study of religion (including the anthropology of religion) responds to it and attempts to elaborate on its understanding of religion as well as on the definition of religion. Do invented religions, however, such as Jediism and the Church of Beer represent something significantly different? Do they differ in some key characteristics from other past or present religious innovations? Traditional definitions of religion might not be without flaws, for example, undue universalism, ahistoricism and de-contextualization, or overlooking the issue of power. Nevertheless, we should not succumb to the ethnocentric illusion that the current religions newly coming into existence are fundamentally different forms of religious life.

Fourth ambivalence: why (and for whom) is the definition needed?

The above-mentioned ambivalences lead us back to the key questions – in contemporary liberal and highly secularized society, who has the authority and legitimacy to decide what is and what is not a religion? And why is a decision needed in the first place? If one takes Czech society as an example (of a liberal society of the Western type with certain

signs of post-communist society), two actors attempting to make such a decision can be identified. One of these is the academic study of religion, while the other is the state. Apart from them, there is of course a strong actor in the form of the media, which frame the public discourse on religion. Nevertheless, media do not have the competence to decide and thus function as a means of reproduction of already existing stereotypes or as an instrument of reproducing the conclusions arrived at by the academic study of religion or by the state.

In the context of science, that is, within the academic study of religion, scepticism prevails as to the possibility of providing a universal definition of religion as Asad poignantly stated in his criticism of Clifford Geerzt's definition of religion employed earlier in this article. Asad argues that it is impossible to understand religious symbols separately from their historical relationships with non-religious symbols or, in Asad's (1993) words,

> their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial. My argument, I must stress, is not just that religious symbols are intimately linked to social life (and so change with it), or that they usually support dominant political power (and occasionally oppose it). It is that different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any representations) acquire their identity and their truthfulness. From this it does not follow that the meanings of religious practices and utterances are to be sought in social phenomena, but only that possibility and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces. (pp. 53–54)

The discussion within the academic study of religion (religious studies, sociology and anthropology of religions, etc.) has focused thus far on deconstructing the academic manufacturing and usage of the concept of religion, including its definition. Such an effort targets unmasking certain discursive manipulations of reality (of the world lived) by the power of science. In connection with Foucault, the tradition of critical analysis of the discourse of the study of religion has been formed, which indicates ethnocentric and postcolonial elements in the conceptualization of religion in the academic study of religion (e.g. Said, King, McCuttchen, Fitzerland, Asad and others). This article attempts to point out a well-known (but not very frequently applied) fact that academic institutions (and academic thinking) and the state as two forms of power (and not only a discursive one), albeit formally independent, intersect and cooperate in reality. The state discourse on religion and academic discourse occasionally need one another and mutually use the legitimacy of the other, even in the case of a highly secularized society.

This can be seen in the case of the state recognizing a particular group as religious. Both groups discussed in this article can be such cases. The Church of Beer has already tried (and Jediism might eventually do so) to be officially recognized by the Czech state as a religious group. What does the process of recognition look like?

Due to the fact that the Constitution of the Czech Republic (and ensuing legislation) grants religious freedom (including no faith at all), everyone (as an individual or within a group) can believe in and practice whatever they consider religion. Believers might (but do not have to) form organizations. Such organizations, that is, groups with a certain legal format, have two options: they can exist as civic associations (without needing to declare their religious character) and become one of many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or they can try to be registered by the state (and thus gain an

officially recognized religious character). To be registered (although not necessary for the mere existence of the group) means that the state respects the association and recognizes it as religious.

In the Czech Republic, the registering body is the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry itself (with respect to the liberal principles of religious freedom) possesses no definition of religion. It does have to, however, pass the final verdict as to whether a given group applying for registration is or is not religious. How then is the decision arrived at?

The applying group must meet certain conditions which are not necessarily connected with their 'religious' character, for example, a certain minimal number of members. In addition, it must submit information on its structure and functioning. Although the legislation does not define religion directly, an implicit understanding is obvious from the characterization of a church or a religious group:

> a church or a religious association is a voluntary community of persons with its own structure, body, inner regulations, religious services and manifestations of faith, established in order to confess a certain religious faith, publicly or privately, and especially to organize meetings, services, teaching and pastoral service. (*Zákon o církvích a náboženských společnostech* [The Law on Churches and Religious Associations], §3)

It is clearly apparent from the above citation that the state considers 'a community' (somehow organized, structured), 'religious rituals' and 'manifestations of faith' as the fundamentals of religion. In this way, the Czech legal demarcation of religion echoes Durkheim's definition. The Czech state does not define, however, what the adjective 'religious' means (unlike Durkheim who considers 'sacred things', that is, things 'set apart' and 'forbidden', as the core of religion). How then can the Ministry's officials, responsible for the process of registration and for the legal decision, recognize that a community is 'religious' with 'religious rituals' and that the community's 'faith' is of a religious character?

The Ministry's officials obviously do not have the necessary competence to make such a decision. They therefore address an expert system, specifically expert witnesses. These are experts on religions, that is, academic institutions and scholars (such as religious studies scholars, anthropologists of religion, sociologists of religion, as well as theologians). The involvement of experts, that is, scholars, in the process of registration and acknowledgement of the religious nature granted to certain groups works in various forms in other countries as well, but is always problematic: cf. for instance the situation in Finland – Mäkelä, 2018. Based on the submitted documents, their own field research and other sources, the expert witnesses write their expert opinion in which they also evaluate the religious (or lack thereof) character of the association. Importantly, although these experts are fully aware of the difficulties of defining religion, they have to submit an opinion allowing the Ministry to make a binary decision – to make a yes/no choice. If, for example, the expert opinion of Jediism described the group as not religion but a 'hyper-real religion', a 'fiction-based religion' or an 'invented religion', the opinion would be useless in the process of registration. Therefore, although academic discussions on the definition of religion can be highly structured, social practice requires an unambiguous verdict.

Conclusion

Using two non-traditional cultural phenomena, I have attempted to demonstrate how the ambivalent conditions contained in modern society influence the discourse on religion, including academic discourse. If a social environment featuring various forms of religion and spirituality is in its principles liberal and secular, then decentralization of power and the diffusion of authority occur, which significantly complicate any efforts at answering the question of when we can (both publicly and academically) call some cultural phenomenon religious and who has the legitimacy to legitimize them as such.

If religious memory has been disrupted or if groups exist that do not make connections to existing religious memories and do not create their own religious memory, and religious authority is diffused, the public significance of academic study of religions grows. A highly secularized society needs a plausible definition of what a religion is even more than societies where religion is firmly grounded, religious traditions are still strong and where religion defines both public and private lives.

To think that any definition of religion temporarily agreed on by scholars from the field of religion could dramatically influence religious life is certainly naive. In this regard, the academic stage of religion is always secondary to real life. On the other hand, it is obvious that the outputs from the academic study of religion become (more or less) part of the discourse of power. If scholars adopt the broad (inclusive) definition of religion, they open up an opportunity for legitimacy of various movements or groups previously eliminated from the field of religion. In contrast, if they adopt the narrow (exclusive) definition, they draw a sharp discursive border between 'religion' and 'non-religion', help eliminate some groups from the field of religion, and thus may subsequently strengthen the tendency to stigmatize them. An academic definition of religion may thus become an element of a religious conflict or a cultural war, and may provide legitimacy to either one party in conflict or the other.

In addition, in highly secularized societies and societies where a radical disruption of religious memory has occurred (such as in some post-communist societies), the importance of an academic definition of religion has another dimension. These societies manifest the state of a certain religious anomy or loss of orientation and ground. Such societies (Czech society being a unique example) lack an embeddedness in history. Their identity is not only 'fluid' in a postmodern way, it is 'fluttering' – not embedded, not leading anywhere and lacking any ambition to 'belong' somewhere or to become bonded to something. In such a situation, the stabilizing and integrating potential of 'expert systems' (in this case, the academic study of religion) may be manifested, which may facilitate fundamental comprehension of the situation, notwithstanding its internal inconsistency. A definition, or rather several definitions, may help it.

The academic stage of religion may point out, for instance, that the state (i.e. the Czech state authority) has not yet taken into account the actually occurring process of individualization. This process involves, among other things, the weakening importance of institutionalized forms of religion (i.e. the weakening necessity for an individual to belong to a single religious organization), as well as the institutionalized individualization (a state where the state authority considers religion primarily and with regard to all related issues as a matter of a free individual, not as a matter of a community or a social

group). Here, academic study of religion, being an expert system, may help the state authority determine its policies. One thing is, however, certain: the state is a political body and its decision-making is thus primarily political (governed by political practice, political aims, and the legitimacy of the national tradition); thus, the expert systems (i.e. scholars and their academic definitions of religion) will remain mere tools and legitimization means of the national state's policy.

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