

Soul Quest Ayahuasca Church of Mother Earth v. the DEA: Religious Sincerity and Situational Adjustments in the Process of Defining a Church and a Plant

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ABSTRACT:

Soul Quest Ayahuasca Church of Mother Earth Inc. (Soul Quest) is a domestic non-profit corporation based in Orlando, Florida. Its members practiced a Christian syncretic religion whose central sacrament was an Amazonian plant medicine called ayahuasca, an illegal Schedule I substance in the United States. Church members consumed ayahuasca to commune with the divine and heal a variety of conditions and illnesses. Soul Quest operated without approved religious exemption status by the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). When Soul Quest was “invited” by the DEA to apply for religious exemption in 2016, the church was denied exemption due to a lack of “religious sincerity.” Soul Quest closed its doors in August 2024 after a \$15 million civil judgment and subsequent bankruptcy. The court battle between Soul Quest and the DEA highlights the ways Soul Quest situated itself within the law and under the direction of the DEA to be classed as a church that could use ayahuasca legally. Their practices and beliefs were shaped to conform to the Federal government’s notion of “church-ness” and demonstration of sincere belief according to law. This essay demonstrates how the State forced religious changes upon the church and religion, violating the separation of Church and State in the Constitution.

Introduction: Soul Quest Ayahuasca Church of Mother Earth Inc.

Chris and Verena Young founded Soul Quest Ayahuasca Church of Mother Earth Inc., or Soul Quest, in Orlando, Fla., in 2015. Prior to its recent disincorporation, more than 50 people typically attended ayahuasca ceremonies every weekend at Soul Quest. After these ceremonies, church members attended virtual sessions to help them integrate their ayahuasca experiences. I performed ethnographic research at Soul Quest in Orlando and in virtual integration sessions from 2019 through August 2024, when Soul Quest shut down. Throughout, I critically documented the legal processes¹ between the United States Drug Enforcement

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¹ Sally Falk Moore, *Law as Process: An Anthropological Approach* (Routledge, 1978), 32-53.

Administration (DEA) and Soul Quest, who attempted to first negotiate and then demonstrate sincere religious practice to gain exemption to use ayahuasca legally.²

The church frequently interacted with the DEA before, during, and after seeking religious exemption. In 2015, Soul Quest established an online presence advertising ayahuasca retreats to the public. This alerted the DEA, which contacted Soul Quest and directed them to apply for religious exemption under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 (CSA 1970). Soul Quest complied and filed for religious exemption. They waited three years for a response. During this period, Soul Quest's leadership began to fear the DEA was disingenuous in their request and that the church and its members could be criminally charged for illegally importing and using ayahuasca. Soul Quest filed suit against the DEA in the Middle District Court of Florida³ on April 22, 2020, hoping to initiate a DEA response to its request for religious exemption. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the DEA was short-staffed and asked the court for a "stay of proceedings"⁴ to work further with Soul Quest to determine proper protocols for their use of ayahuasca.⁵ The DEA's stay was granted by the court, and they began to investigate Soul Quest on-site and through interviews. In 2021, the DEA denied Soul Quest religious exemption due to a lack of "religious sincerity."⁶

Performing Sincerity in Law

In this section, I will review the ways that the DEA claimed that Soul Quest was insincere. To meet the DEA's expectations for a sincere religion, Soul Quest downplayed what they call "shamanic practices," despite these practices being essential to their founding. They also instituted congregational services like Sunday Church, one of the religious accoutrements mentioned in the relevant case law.⁷

Critically, the DEA argued that Soul Quest's lack of religious sincerity was demonstrated by the limited significance of the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* (AM) for many church members. The AM is an online manuscript that Soul Quest identified as its "sacred text," which the DEA considered equivalent to holy scriptures in other religions.⁸ The DEA took issue with the AM because it was published online, was written anonymously, and had no liturgy nor doctrine recognizable based on Protestant Christianity's notion of a sacred text. They claimed the AM only came up in conversation a couple of times in interviews with church members and asserted that most members did not mention the text at all. Contrary to the DEA's assessment, my research found that Soul Quest did use the text liturgically, referred to it in church services and Zoom integration sessions, and often read it aloud during ayahuasca ceremonies. Nevertheless, in response to the DEA, Soul Quest created integration groups focused on the AM to prove they were sincere in their beliefs and that church members engaged in the work as a sacred text. They also focused more heavily on the text in ayahuasca

² This was the basis of my Ph.D. dissertation: Tarryl Janik, "Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth: Ayahuasca Decriminalization and the Struggle of an Institution to Become a Church" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023).

³ *Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth, Inc. et al v. Attorney General, United States of America et al* (2020) Filing 1, April 22, 2020.

⁴ *Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth, Inc. et al v. Attorney General, United States of America et al* (2020) Filing 23, June 15, 2020.

⁵ This is similar to the case between The Church of the Eagle and the Condor, who too also worked with the DEA to receive an exemption to use Schedule I substances in their religious practice. Unlike Soul Quest, they were successful and reached a settlement with the DEA in May of 2024.

⁶ DEA Letter of Final Determination under 21 U.S.C. § 877. 04/16/2021.

⁷ See *United States v. Meyers*, 906 F. Supp. 1494 (D. Wyo. 1995), wherein the Church of Marijuana was evaluated vis a vis "religious accoutrements," one of which being ceremonies and rituals.

⁸ See ayahuascachurches.org (accessed April 2022). The *Ayahuasca Manifesto* was published in 2011 online by an anonymous author.

ceremonies. The DEA's criticism made the text more prevalent in Soul Quest's religious practice. The State made the church consider the AM more sacred.

The DEA further found Soul Quest's emphasis on psychotherapy in ritual and integration sessions to be insincere because, in their view, psychotherapy and religion are incompatible. Specifically, they critiqued Soul Quest church leaders who described ayahuasca use as "therapy" rather than "sacrament." "Ayahuasca is five, fifteen, or twenty years of psychotherapy in a weekend," one leader testified in court.⁹ The psychotherapy Soul Quest used was developed by Carl Jung (focusing on archetypes and the shadow) and is in no way incompatible with religion. In fact, Jung's psychotherapy is quite common in the psychedelic milieu as well as within many religious communities. It is not clear why having psychotherapy, especially Jung's psychotherapy, included in religious practice would invalidate the religion. This is especially evident given that some argue Jung's psychotherapy is itself a religion.¹⁰

Finally, the DEA viewed Soul Quest's initial association and later disassociation from the Oklevueha Native American Church (ONAC) to be evidence of insincerity. In Soul Quest's earlier efforts to attain religious protection without having to apply for exemption, they affiliated with ONAC because they believed it would grant them the same legal protections afforded to the Native American Church. They later learned that the ONAC's claims to Indigenous lineage and their claims to be legally allowed to use entheogens are contested.¹¹ Realizing this, Soul Quest disassociated from them. From the DEA's perspective, this represented insincere religious beliefs and was held against Soul Quest.

Soul Quest vs. the DEA: Religious Sincerity and Law

Soul Quest was originally forced to apply for religious exemption by the DEA only for the DEA to reject their claim, citing a lack of religious sincerity.¹² What sincerity means in this context is murky at best. Scholar of religion Winnifred Fallers Sullivan (2020) argues that the State's understanding of "sincere belief" is informed and shaped by what she calls the "Church in law" or "church-state mimesis."¹³ This view, according to Sullivan, is itself derived from a normative view of Protestant Christianity. "American law has shown that it cannot think religion without thinking Church—that the space for religion in US law is a church-shaped space," a space that is "largely, although not exclusively, indebted, theologically and phenomenologically, to Protestant reflection and culture," Sullivan writes.¹⁴ The historical problem of the Church in law determines the "impossibility of religious freedom" for any "otherwise religion"—like Soul Quest—because American law has proven itself unable to think outside the Protestant Christian framework.¹⁵ Within this lineage of thought is the idea that a religion in US law must have a congregation, a firm set of "sincere" beliefs, and a connection to a "tradition."¹⁶

⁹ "Moreno Testimony," 2021.

¹⁰ HA Senn, "Jungian Shamanism," *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 21, 1 (1989): 113-121.

¹¹ This is how church members framed the situation to me during interviews.

¹² They were also denied for a lack of proper safety, manufacturing, storage, and handling protocols of DMT according to the CSA 1970. See the DEA's final determination letter in 2021. After the dismissal they then re-submitted their complaint to the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals.

¹³ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Church, State, Corporation: Construing Religion in US Law* (The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 10.

¹⁴ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 7.

¹⁵ See Sullivan, 2005 & 2020.

¹⁶ This is key when juxtaposing the Soul Quest case with the Church of the Eagle and the Condor, who claimed a direct lineage to a Shipibo retreat center in Peru in which the plaintiff Dr. Tafur helped co-found and manage. See *Church of the Eagle and the Condor v. Merrick B. Garland et al.*, case number 2:22-cv-01004-SRB, in the U.S. District Court of Arizona. The Church of the Eagle and the Condor

What the DEA misunderstood is that, for Soul Quest, sincere belief was not dictated from the top down. Rather, it was intertwined with the extremely personal and subjective experiences people had with the ayahuasca plant.¹⁷ Contrary to this, the State considers sincere religious belief to be institutionally formalized and consistently held in the church community.¹⁸ Soul Quest did not recognize the possibility of an institutionally sanctioned belief and, therefore, ran afoul of the State's "sincerity test." Failing this test, Soul Quest was assumed to be a false religion.

I believe this is an incorrect understanding of how belief functioned for Soul Quest. The religious experience at Soul Quest did not take place in a brick-and-board building and was not governed by the church leadership. The experience happened within. At Soul Quest the plant brew was the church.¹⁹ Instead of top-down beliefs that would be legible to the State's Protestant-informed model of religion, Soul Quest's members' sincere beliefs emerged from each individual's encounter with the ayahuasca brew. What brought people to the church was the ayahuasca brew, nothing else.²⁰ This shared focus on the plant brew was the foundation of Soul Quest's members' beliefs, practices, and rituals. The perspective that plants can be the foundation of a religious movement and even have agency is shared by many Indigenous traditions in the Amazon and elsewhere.²¹

The Plant was the Church & The End of Soul Quest

The Soul Quest case is an inflection point in an enduring story about religious freedom and sincerity in America. Religious freedom is thought of as a basic right in the United States, but, as we see in the case of Soul Quest, what constitutes "religion" is a moving target. The State's definition of religion and belief cannot be separated from a narrow version of Protestant Christianity. Religious freedom is thus mostly likely to be protected only when a religion aligns with Protestant Christianity. Recognizing this, Soul Quest attempted to alter its practices to be more in line with what the State deemed acceptable and sincere religion. Spencer Dew (2019) demonstrates that those persecuted by the State will often adjust themselves in such a way as to meet the State's demands. He calls this a "survival strategy."²² This strategy worked well for Soul Quest for a while. They continued to host ayahuasca ceremonies and planned to

seemed to petition to the RFRA 1994 specifically and not the CSA 1970, which also could have affected the settlement in their favor.

¹⁷ See Janik, "Soul Quest," 2023. In my PhD dissertation I examine the phenomenological experience of ayahuasca in depth.

¹⁸ The State deems that institutionally formalized beliefs have to reflect sincerely held religious beliefs based in the notion of the "Church in law" and the "sincerity test" of *United States v. Ballard* (1944). It was in the 1940s when courts broadened the notion of religious freedom, and "sincere belief" became the standard for defining religion.

¹⁹ "Ayahuasca, the plant (a combination of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* shrub) is the church at Soul Quest...This is not argued by Soul Quest and here I take an interpretive approach that does not come out of the interviews of the participants at Soul Quest (who are concerned with performing church-ness)...We do see it in statements like this from Chris Young, the founder, who says, 'It is all about coming to the medicine'...The unspecified 'it' and 'all' are instructive in their vagueness...At the end of the day, it is about the plant." (See Janik, "Soul Quest," 2023, 13.)

²⁰ See Janik, "Soul Quest," 2023.

²¹ The belief that substances and plants have their own agency has been studied broadly within many different Amazonian groups. I encountered this extensively in my previous ethnographic study of *kanaima* in Patamona culture. See: Tarryl Janik, "A Return to Dark Shamans: Kanaima and the Cosmology of Threat" (MA. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018).

²² Spencer Dew, *The Aliites: Race and Law in the Religions of Noble Drew Ali* (The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 1-22.

expand and build another church in Texas during the liminal process of litigation with the DEA.

In August of 2024, Chris Young sent an email to church members announcing the closure of Soul Quest due to “overwhelming debt brought on by legal fees in a \$15 million civil judgment” and the continued burden they carried brought on by the State.²³ Since then, a schism took place, and other prominent members of the church founded their own ayahuasca church called “Sacred Sanctuary,” also located in Florida. Looking back, it is clear that Soul Quest’s response to the DEA backfired. Rather than contort their religious practices to model themselves as a Church in-law, Soul Quest would likely have been better off representing themselves authentically, according to their own ideas about sincere belief. Yet, Soul Quest was caught in a bind. The church was held to standards of religious sincerity that were incongruent with members’ beliefs, but in order to practice with illegal substances, they needed to meet the government’s standards. In the end, this became a double bind. Soul Quest was expected to respond to the DEA’s concerns, but by adjusting their religious practices to meet the State’s demands, they simultaneously undermined their claims to sincerely held beliefs. It was this double bind that ultimately led to Soul Quest’s demise.

²³ Chris Young, email message, Aug 12, 2024. Note: The 2018 death of Brandon Begley that caused the civil lawsuit was certainly part of the reason that Soul Quest shut down, but in my assessment not the primary cause.