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Between Ideological Formatting and Subjective Experience:
The Blurring Lines of New Religious Identities

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Abstract

This essay proposes a theoretical reading of contemporary religious phenomena through the two concepts of "ideologization" and "psychologization." It situates contemporary religious trends within the context of a new "global" culture and analyzes some of the ways in which they break away from traditional concepts of religion while blurring the lines between the religious and the secular.

This essay aims at developing the notions of religious "reification" and "formatting" as underpinnings of a theoretical framework for the study of recent religious trends in today's largely globalized world. The goal is not to develop extensive analyses of a comprehensive set of supporting data—the limits and focus of this essay do not permit such a broad endeavor—but merely to outline the theoretical vectors of a potentially fruitful interpretation of contemporary religious phenomena. The argument is that a critical meditation on the two concepts of "reification" and "formatting" may allow us to understand the ways in which religious phenomena have become increasingly indistinguishable, in their anthropological profile, from other human belief systems and experiences. We borrow the two concepts of "reification" and "formatting" from the work of the celebrated theologian Wilfred Cantwell Smith and from the recent contributions of sociologist Olivier Roy.

In his seminal *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1963)*,* Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) argued that the history of religions demonstrates a process of reification. For religious faith to be reified means to be gradually reduced to the status of a "thing" among others, to be changed from a living reality—an internal way of relating to the transcendent—into a mere mental "object." As a most symptomatic indicator of this reifying "objectification," Cantwell Smith sees the growing reference to the category of "religion" as betraying a proportional decline of the central inspiration of religious life, that is to say, transformative faith. The proliferation of the concept and the term betrays a shrinking down of the inner reality. For Cantwell Smith religious reification is most often connected to an excessive reliance on mental representations and a growing theological systematization, both of which function as substitutes for the inner dynamics of a lived relationship with the transcendent.[1]

Stemming from a more sociological point of view, we find in Olivier Roy's recent book *Holy Ignorance* (2013) fertile critical analyses that allow us to take the concept of "reification" a step further within the context of our "post-religious" culture. One of Roy's central claims is that there is no actual religious life without a cultural "formatting" of religion. In other words, there is no "pure religion," which means that religious beliefs and practices cannot grow social roots, survive the test of time, and effectively spread without adaptations to the various socio-cultural contexts in which they are received. This process is not only necessary for survival but also allows for a reciprocal enrichment of religion and culture. It helps to "settle down" religious principles and make them assimilable in a wider collective scope. It also provides religious realities with intellectual, artistic, and educational symbolic supports and modes of expression and transmission. There has appeared in the last decades, however, a new kind of formatting that does not regard the

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[1] Cantwell Smith deplores this tendency, and he proposes to drop the term "religion" as a way to resist this reification, "for fundamentally one has to do not with religions, but with religious persons" (1963: 153).

particularities of culture but rather the conditions of the "globalized culture" in general. This kind is "fundamentalist" formatting, "the religious form that is most suited to globalization, because it accepts its own deculturation and makes it the instrument of its claim to universality" (Roy, 2013: 5) in the context of globalism.

This new formatting, which espouses the formal means of expression and communication of the post-modern world, is also and by the same token a "de-formatting," in the sense that it claims to isolate a "restored" universal core deemed to have been adulterated by various forms of cultural and historical accretions. Since technological media are the primary means of transmission in globalized culture, they provide ways of reformatting the "purified" message of religion through universal and egalitarian channels of transmission. In this view of reality, space, time, and qualitative differences are reduced to a minimum or even abolished. Religion, whether charismatic or puritanical, is deemed radically independent from geo-cultural sites; it is abstracted from historical and theological developments, as it is also free from institutional hierarchies and traditional lineages of hermeneutics, spirituality, and art. The only compelling priority in the primarily proselytizing thrust of new religious movements is that their message be easily, quickly, and globally transmittable and consumable.

This reason is why religious phenomena have to abide by the requirements of technological transmission and maximal standards of accessibility. Typical examples of these ways of operating are informational leaflets, televised predication, and interactive websites. Such means of transmission and communication contribute, through the postmodern formatting which they entail, to a de-formatting from the specificities of culture. Religion must be reduced to a measure of maximal simplicity, which also means that it must remain unmediated and egalitarian in its modes of dispensation. The allegedly "true religion," which can be put into slogans and formulae, tweets and web links, has to be freed from cultural "corruptions" that have, in this view of things, deprived it of its purity, hence also its universality. There is therefore a kind of global Christianity, global Islam, global Buddhism, etc.

It must be emphasized that this flattening (in the sense of Thomas Friedman's [2005] "flat world") and externalization of religion (in which ostensible and ostentatious markers tend to become global rather than ethno-cultural) provide in some cases an opportunity for a further increasingly influential trend: the transformation of religion into an ideology. We use the latter term with the scientific and systematic socio-political implications that it accrued as early as its initial use in early 19th century France to refer to the scientist and anti-theist reformers of the *Société des idéologues* who were critical of Napoleon's despotism, such as Destutt de Tracy, Volney, and Daunou. Thus, the term is not used here in the general sense of a mere set of ideas but in the more specific sense of an all-encompassing system of concepts unified by a single principle of intellectual explanation that provides a universal interpretation of reality in view of a radical transformation of

society; hence the fundamentally ideological character of movements such as Marxism, Nazism, and Liberalism.

While it is true that traditional religions share common features with ideologies, it must also be stressed that their principles and goals pertain to an utterly different order of reality. This contrast appears in the way that the faithful consider their respective religions as divine messages connected to a transcendent revelation, centered on spiritual and ethical transformation, and leading to personal salvation. Although it is undeniable that traditional religions *also* involve social and political dimensions—if only because their spiritual and ethical principles and practices cannot but have effects upon collective life—it can be argued that their primary goal and focus do not lie *a priori,* nor primarily, in the creation of a new socio-political order. In other words the socio-political implications of the message are only extrinsic translations or manifestations of ethico-spiritual imperatives, without which they would have no operative effectiveness, no socio-cultural supports, and, in a sense, no actual meaning.

By ideologization, by contrast, is meant a process whereby the reifying bent of religion increasingly functions as the driving force of an agenda of transformation of society. This type of orientation is hardly, if at all, distinguishable from political ideologies in its form and ways of operating. Furthermore, such ideologizing trends must be differentiated from historical and contemporary phenomena of political exploitation of religious concepts and institutions. The latter have been widespread, indeed quasi-universal, but they have not entailed in and of themselves a mutation of religion into ideology. In other words religion can and often has been used as a means to political ends, but ideologization extends beyond the mere instrumentalization of religion by identifying religion as such with ideological goals and methods.

While reification refers, in Cantwell Smith's analysis, to a gradual move away from inner faith, and fundamentalism, in a modern context, can be deemed to be the extreme outcome of this shift through its relentless emphasis on formal creeds and syllabi of prescriptions and proscriptions, ideologization intensifies the fundamentalist course of reification by focusing on its effective power as a means of socio-political transformation. The "natural" shift from reifying fundamentalism to ideologization is illustrated, for instance, by the discrete steps, in terms of "positions," but also the gradual continuum, in terms of "trends," from the religious reification entailed by puritanical reformism to the socio-political religious proselytism and activism involved in its diffusion, and finally to coercively militant—sometimes terrorist—forms of religious ideology.[2]

By contrast with the aforementioned reifying trends of religious ideology, which tend to function as a totalizing, or even totalitarian, system through

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[2] For an insightful analysis of fundamentalism along similar lines, one may refer—in the context of Jewish fundamentalism—to Mittleman's (1993: 223) view of the latter as "the modern form of transcendence-driven politics."

militant activism, the increasingly widespread psychologization of religion is lived by many as a form of inner liberation from outer constraints, beginning with religious ones. It is, consciously or not, an individualist response to the ideologization of religion, although it can sometimes quite paradoxically run parallel to it. At any rate this psychologization of the religious expresses a search for individual fulfillment and freedom from social pressures, institutional shackles, and the perceived meaninglessness of postmodern life. As such it prioritizes personal experiences unmediated by theological concepts and traditional *magisteria.* The New Age constellation and most of the forms of holistic neo-spirituality pertain to this "post-religious" model, as do also, in their own distinct ways, the revivalist and charismatic movements that have recently grown out of a partial collapse of established religions. In both cases matters of religion and spirituality are increasingly understood as converging on a personal and experiential state of psycho-physiological plenitude, as well as dynamic creativity or exploration.

There is little doubt that, from the point of view of religious traditions, such experiential and largely individualistic trends cannot be immune from a degree of psychological reductionism, inasmuch as feelings, or even psychological states of balance and happiness, could hardly be construed, in traditional contexts, as the end goal of religion and spiritual life. Even from the point of view of contemplative and mystical currents within established religions, feelings of inner elation, balance, and comfort have been considered only as the contingent and accidental psychological byproducts of religious life, not as its aims. One may introduce on this point the crucial distinction between the spiritual and the psychic, which was developed by René Guénon in his classic *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*. For him, the very confusion between the psychic and the spiritual constitutes the primary marker of neo-spirituality (Guénon, 2000: 283–90). By contrast Guénon asserts that all forms of traditional spirituality see the spiritual dimension as transcending the psychic realm, like the universal transcends the individual, or like the eternal transcends the changing. Therefore, from a religious point of view, the problem with psychologizing religion lies in that it plays down, or bypasses, the very foundation of religion, which is transcendence. The recurrent phenomenon consisting in abstracting meditational practices from their overall religious context, like in new forms of yoga and "transcendental meditation," bears witness to this emphasis on physio-psychological well-being and functionality.

Correlatively to this experimental focus, probably the most characteristic aspect in the recent psychologizing of religion has been its individualistic thrust. The individual has become the locus of definition and realization of the conceptual and experiential content of the religious and the spiritual. This pattern holds true in two different ways, either when individual judgment is substituted for traditional magisterium or when emotional and moral experience overrides ritual mediation. The first tendency will not detain us here since it does not pertain, at least directly, to psychology. As for the

second type of bent, it appears in the ways charismatic movements envision dogmas, institutions, theological developments and hierarchies, and even ritual practices as obstructing or betraying individual faith and the channels of inspiration by the Spirit. Neo-spirituality tends to isolate techniques from religious context, while neo-religion is liable to do away with ritual mediations.

Thus religious authenticity is increasingly seen as being grounded in the "irreplaceable singularity" of one's experience, and Christian neo-spirituality, in particular, tends to foster a very individualized understanding and practice of the faith. This is not to say that the collective has no role to play in such contexts, but it does so in ways that are largely amorphous and effusively or ecstatically bonding more than instructional and dialogical, functioning as it often does as an emotional and communal amplifier of individual experience. While the ideologisation of religion is like an ultimate outgrowth of reification, its psychologization may be deemed to result, at least in part, from an ignorance or a rejection of what Cantwell Smith calls "the cumulative tradition," i.e. the body of collective wisdom, practices, arts, and cultural forms that have bloomed and coalesced in the wake of the expansion and development of the human fruits of the original dispensation.

While the ideologization and psychologization of religion have tended to evolve separately, and to a large extent in reaction to each other—in the way fundamentalism protests against the privatization of religion and new spirituality distrusts its institutionalization—one cannot but be struck, however, by the way in which both have developed through similar modes of "global formatting" that function by and large as a de-culturating process, since the focus is either on the universal as global horizon of ideological agenda or on the individual as a culture-free locus of experience. Religion and spirituality are thus abstracted from their traditional and cultural matrix and offered as global objects of dissemination and consumption. It may even sometimes happen that a paradoxical convergence of the two patterns of religious de-culturation arises, as when, for instance, joining a religious ideology and fighting for it to the death is lived as inducing a sense of individual fulfillment.

Taken as a whole, formatted religious ideologization may be deemed to result from the challenges and crises of meaning brought about by globalization, while also conditioned by the latter's modalities and ways of operating. It can be analyzed as an outcome of the destruction of traditional identities that began with the Industrial Revolution, continued with the colonial era, and exploded with the entrance into the age of global economy and technology. It is a fruit of this process, in which it participates in some ways as a model of "modern religion" while also in some respects a reaction against it inasmuch as it opposes its secular and economic dynamics, hence its contradictions and its aberrations. It functions on the mode of a resistance that is all the more systematic and radical in that it is unable to reach its ends on the socio-political level on which it situates itself, and all the more fragile in

that it is severed from any substantial intellectual, ethical, and spiritual anchoring.

As for the psychologization of the religious, it is diametrically opposed to ideologization, while also sharing, as we have suggested, some of its global modalities and predicaments. Against the reifying and oppressive trends of religious ideology, psychologized religion is first of all an individual, if not individualistic, phenomenon that thrives upon the global avenues of social delinking and mediatic dissemination. Like religious ideologization, but for different reasons, it is largely, or totally, a de-culturated phenomenon. There is therein no need for sacred and traditional mediations that would operate, or at least facilitate, a spiritual and moral transformation. Traditional culture is seen as a hindrance, through its constraining forms and institutions, rather than a repository of grace and wisdom. In the market of new spirituality individuals are invited to adopt, combine, or create their own neo-spiritual kits and to cultivate their own understanding and practice independently from lines of authority, transmission, and teaching.

As we have indicated, the most characteristic new forms of ideologized and psychologized religious global phenomena have broken away from traditional mediations that used to be inherent to religious identity. Among the latter, it is herein suggested that new forms of globalized religion have more specifically neglected or rejected six fundamental areas of religious life. These include (1) intellectual traditions—in their metaphysical and theological development and dialogical complexity, (2) spiritual and contemplative traditions—including the mystical and esoteric dimensions, (3) traditional lines of institutional learned authority—in all domains of religious life, (4) the "sacramental" dimensions of religious life—in the wider sense of sacred vehicles of theurgic grace, (5) artistic and aesthetic principles, techniques, and productions, and finally (6) the ethics of inner virtues.

Intellectual traditions have been ignored or discarded in the name of an emphasis on the exclusive primacy of scriptural or experiential immediacy. In the new globalized religion, intellectuality is conceived as disconnected from the practicality of experience and activism. It is considered to be abstract and therefore irrelevant to the individual and collective tasks at hand. Neo-spirituality and new religious sensibilities fail to perceive any intrinsic relationship between doctrine and practice. Indeed, they tend to consider the former as a system of accretions that are largely foreign to the religious dispensation and block access to the latter. The "simplicity" of new religion cannot reckon with the complex intellectual elaborations of what Cantwell Smith calls the "cumulative tradition."

As a second traditional stream set aside by new religion, the contemplative and spiritual paths and disciplines, which one may also refer to as "mystical," are by and large dismissed as deviations or replaced by individual inspirations that claim unmediated access to the source of religion, whether it be the Holy Spirit or scripture. Here again such traditional contemplative schools are conceived as heterogeneous developments that obstruct a direct access to the

source of faith and religious practice. Spiritual and mystical methods are seen as human constructs or innovations that amount to either human sedimentations or heterodox and heterogeneous infiltrations.

As a result of the two aforementioned tendencies, we also attend a drive toward a "democratization" of religion which is parallel to the dismissal of *magisteria* and traditional hierarchies, whether institutional or spiritual. The availability of new channels of transmission and communication through the virtual world is one of the major ways in which these trends can translate into an ideal of egalitarian access to "true religion" beyond the "elitist" boundaries inherited from the past.

In parallel, and given the frequent association between hierarchical authority and ritual performance, the "sacramental" is rejected as either "divinization" of the means or obsolete and "magical" corruptions. The ritual dimension of religion is sometimes dismissed as "external" and purely "figurative," while in other instances reduced to an obediential performance of the injunctions of the law.

Finally, the arts and ethics, while not as directly and explicitly discarded as the previous components of religion, tend to be either largely ignored or included in ways that mark a clear shift away from their traditional norms and functions. With respect to the arts, they tend to be conceived as individual modes of expression that do not need to abide by traditional standards, or at any rate do not pertain to the objective sphere of "sacramental" theurgy. The ideal of "simplicity" that animates the fundamentalist spirit of return to the origins leans toward belittling the role of aesthetics, which will often be seen as a result as a deviation from apostolic purity. An exclusive reference to original "integrity" as antecedent to the crystallization and development of artistic traditions also means that the sacral homogeneity of artistic language and its intrinsic connection to the religious *weltanschauung* is likely to be overlooked. Furthermore, the de-culturation of religion that we have already highlighted is particularly perceptible in the artistic domain, as religious aesthetic expressions, to the extent that they still exist, move away from ethno-cultural inspirations to individual improvisations or even amalgamation of secular modern elements.

If one considers the examples of the two fastest growing religious movements, the charismatic Pentecostal churches and the various schools of Salafi Islam, one may observe some paradoxical convergences. Both are strongly predicated on a desire to return to an unmediated connection to the unsullied source of the religion as they understand it. In Pentecostalism this return means connecting with the Holy Spirit. In Salafi Islam the major concern is "right practice," or orthopraxy. It means returning to a purified form of Islamic practice that duplicates as faithfully as possible the forms of outer worship and behavior of the Prophet and the pious *salafs*. In Pentecostalism immediate experience tends to validate the belief in scripture

rather than the opposite.[3] Its quasi-exclusive emphasis on psycho-spiritual experience lies at the core of the Pentecostal distance from the theological and philosophical traditions, the institutional intermediaries, and the sacramental economy. Analogously Salafism emphasizes what it considers to be the simplicity of Islam, a simplicity that excludes the need for theological elaborations, which are deemed to be human innovations.[4] This overall thrust also accounts for the dismissal of magisterial hierarchies and sacramental mediations. The status of the spiritual tradition, the arts, and inner morality is, however, less obvious and sometimes ambiguous and deserves further consideration.

At first sight, the ecstatic characters of charismatic movements would seem to indicate an affinity with the world of mysticism. The traditional definitions of mysticism, however, whether in Christian or other contexts, lead one to qualify seriously, if not invalidate, this view. Paul A. Hughes, for instance, writes,

> As a third-generation Pentecostal…I maintain that Mysticism and its practice—*e.g.*, Contemplative Prayer and introspection with the aim of *Transcendence* and "spiritual formation"—represent a foreign and alternate spirituality to that intended and prescribed by the New Testament. Heretofore, I based this contention largely on the absence of New Testament support for mystical practice, especially in terms of clear didactic statements (*i.e.*, NT believers are neither commanded nor taught to pray contemplatively, to chant mantras or empty the mind of thought); and conversely, on important commands and practices in the New Testament that are often discounted or ignored by Mystics (Hughes, 2014: 115).

The objections presented are scriptural but also based on the primacy of the experience of the Spirit. Pentecostalism is here understood as foreign to spiritual methods and practices that would predispose to the Spirit, as it were, but also to the very notion of a transformation into the divine nature through

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[3] "The authenticity of scriptures is *a posteriori* for Pentecostals" (Lewis, 2000: 110–11, quoted in Noel, 2010: 142).

[4] "[T]he greatest weakness of neo-revivalism, and the greatest disservice it has done to Islam, is an almost total lack of positive effective Islamic thinking and scholarship within its ranks, its intellectual bankruptcy, and its substitution of cliche-mongering for serious intellectual endeavor. It has often contended, with a real point, that the learning of the conservative traditional *ulema*, instead of turning Muslims toward the Qur'an, has turned them away from it. …The traditionalist *ulema*, if their education has suffered from a disorientation toward the purposes of the Qur'an, have nevertheless built up an imposing edifice of learning that invests their personalities with a certain depth; the neo-revivalist is, by contrast, a shallow and superficial person—really rooted neither in the Qur'an nor in traditional intellectual culture, of which he knows practically nothing. Because he has no serious intellectual depth or breadth, his consolation and pride both are to chant ceaselessly the song that Islam is 'very simple' and 'straightforward', without knowing what these words mean" (Rahman, 1982: 137).

the Spirit. Divine inspiration is purely experiential and temporary, and it does not appear to affect the nature of the recipient, who remains a passive vessel of glossolalic grace throughout.

Salafi Islam shuns mysticism for analogous reasons on the basis of its literalist reading of scripture, which excludes any spiritual or esoteric contents, but also as a result of seemingly opposite stands, when it decries a focus on subjective experience as an innovative straying from the straight path. In sum, mysticism is simply rejected as foreign to both the Quran and the Prophet's teachings and practices. As a result the contemplative practices introduced by Sufi orders are seen as *bida'*, or deviant innovations, although some forms of puritanical and revivalist Islam do not always exclude Sufi inspired principles and emphases as long as they remain within the pale of mainstream formal piety.

With respect to the arts, their consideration unfolds either in terms of their experiential and emotional impact, in the perspective of charismatic movements, or in regard to their legal and social acceptability, from the point of view of puritanical sensibilities. Thus Pentecostal churches value singing, music, and ecstatic dance as means of expressive manifestation of an inspiration by the Spirit. Musical expression is favored to the extent that it induces subjective states of elation in consonance with the free participation in the Spirit. On the other hand, Pentecostals remain largely iconoclastic, and they reject sacred formal patterns and liturgical traditions in favor of a more informal, spur-of-the-moment authenticity in performing improvisations. In consequence, one can hardly refer to Pentecostal principles of aesthetics, and indeed much of the artistic supports woven into church performances share in the forms of popular contemporary production, arguably with little concern for their symbolic or spiritual value.

Salafi Islam tends to consider aesthetics with some degree of suspicion, if not to reject them as *bida'* or innovation. The puritanical impulse is iconoclastic, as it tends to see artistic productions as supports of idolatry, especially to the degree that they touch upon religious principles and practices. In extreme cases, which carry the logic of the puritanical thrust to its most far-fetched consequences, any graphic or auditory beautification of scriptural words or sentences may border on a human debasement of the transcendent. Purity excludes beauty to the extent that the latter is a human "addition" to the former.

In Christian new religious sensibility, morality is largely defined in terms of charismatic piety. The subjective experience of the Spirit is the most authentic, if not the only, moral compass. Normative morality and religious laws are, in the most individualistic forms of Christian neo-spirituality, set aside as tainted with formalism and human illusions of control. By contrast, but with similar outcomes, puritanical Islam tends to emphasize the legal over the moral, the latter being considered out of reach of human determination. Objective orthopraxy therefore supersedes subjective morality. In other words, the question of inner morality is circumvented, practically if not theoretically,

through an experiential and individualistic focus on the Spirit or, conversely, through a quasi-exclusive consideration of the formal horizon of the law. Little, if any, account is taken in both charismatic Christian and puritanical Muslim practices of the cultivation of moral virtues, which are either illusory or undecidable.

On the charismatic side, a certain recognition of the weight of moral "impurity" can be concomitant of an exclusive reliance on the Spirit, flowing from an emphasis on the natural frailty of the human soul.[5] On the puritanical side, in ideologized forms of religion, particularly in Islam, morality is largely limited to the external perimeter of legal codes of behavior. We attend a social codification of ethics, as it were.[6] What is at stake for puritanical reformist discourse is a socio-political manifestation of "legal ethics." In this climate, it is often claimed that inner ethico-spiritual realities are out of reach from human awareness, thought to be the exclusive province of God, which means that human beings can only "prove themselves" through a scrupulous program of external religious compliance. The ethical is by and large equated with the allowed and the forbidden, the *halāl* and the *haram*. Moreover, Salafi ethics is largely constructed as a striving for one's purification from any cultural elements that would affect the integrity of formal practice. The example of the Prophet is understood in terms of what he did and did not do, enjoined and forbade. It is an ethics of orthopraxy in which any intuition of deeper zones of moral awareness is hardly touched upon.

Another essay would be needed *a contrario* to analyze why and how the six aforementioned dimensions would, or do, stand firmly in the way of any ideologization and psychologization of religion. This resistance is not only because they involve, deepen, and refine an inner and outer religious culture that parries any reduction of religion to outer forms and their socio-political enforcement but also inasmuch as they provide objective intellectual and spiritual means of affirming transcendence beyond individual and socio-political reductions, thereby enabling religious realities to orient both the individual and the collective away from the pitfalls of ideological and psychological reductionism. At any rate, there is little doubt that the growing ideologization and psychologization of postmodern religious movements entail a blurring of the very concept and lived reality of religion. Since religion has come to be understood increasingly as a standard of socio-political revolution or transformation, or as a psycho-physical means of reaching individual happiness or simply more effective social functionality, it

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[5] Thus, it has been argued that in Pentecostalism the "impurity" of ethical existence is akin to a kind of secularization: "The 'impure' Pentecostal ethics, far from being pathologies of neoliberal capitalism, far from being betrayal of pristine, original pentecostal spirituality (whatever that is), arguably, constitute strategic mechanisms orienting beliefs, behaviors, and ideals to the hard realities of social existence…" (Wariboko, 2014: 231).

[6] Manni Crone (2016: 156) notes, for instance, the existence "in present-day France…[of] a rising Salafi discourse framing Shari'a as a morality 'oriented towards a code' (Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs,* p.156)."

becomes quite difficult to characterize it as a fundamentally distinct category among values and practices, besides of course by way of their religious referent. As foreign it may sound theoretically from the secular climate of contemporary culture, much of the "new religion's" focus and modes of operation contribute to make it indistinguishable in numerous ways from other areas of human culture, to the extent that religious realities are liable to be defined by the same axiological standards as what lies outside their perimeter.

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