From reification to formatting: reflections on religion in the globalized world.

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This short paper aims at providing a preliminary conceptual framework for further studies in the globalization of religions. It is primarily focused on new trends in "traditional religions," while being also arguably relevant to some new religious movements. It must also be noted that the following considerations remain theoretical and most often refrain from systematic contextual illustrations or examples, this being for the sake of conceptual clarity and brevity. It also means that the proposed framework cannot avoid the pitfalls of schematization, and should therefore be treated as heuristic rather than totalizing.

Let us begin with two quotes, which set the background for the theoretical argument. One is from the influential historian of religions Wilfred Cantwell-Smith, the other by the contemporary sociologist of religions Olivier Roy:

--"It is not entirely foolish to suggest that the rise of the concept 'religion' is in some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of

religion itself. (...) Here, then, is a process of institutionalization, of conceptual reification. Concepts, terminology, and attention shift from personal orientation to an ideal, then to an abstraction, finally to an institution" (...) [1]

-- "Globalization standardizes and formats religion, it leads one to think it through common categories that are imposed upon the believers. (...) I prefer to call 'formatting', rather than 'acculturation', this process of standardization, for the term 'acculturation' already presupposes what is at stake (that is that every religion is incarnated in a culture) and does not account for the dissociation between cultural markers and religious markers. The concept of acculturation supposes that there is a harmony between the markers." [2]

These quotes invite us to reflect on the two important processes of reification and formatting in religious history and religious life. The argument herein is that these two key notions can help us enlighten some of the most problematic characters and paradoxes of contemporary religious consciousness. Besides the considerable differences in outlook and intents that they reveal, what these two approaches hold in common, one in theological terms and the second in more sociological ways, lies in

[1] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion,* Fortress Press, Minneapolis,
[2] Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance --When Religion and Culture Part Ways*, Columbia University Press, 2011, p.318.

their emphasizing the dangers of abstracting "religion" as a notion from the spiritual and cultural contexts in which religious phenomena are situated, and from which they grow. Cantwell Smith invites us to meditate on the fact that religion cannot but become a "thing" (*res*) when it is no more understood as an inner faith nurtured by a cultural soil. In a somewhat parallel way, Roy argues that religion as a lived reality cannot be separated from culture, which means that a growing disconnection between the two spells trouble. A further, more detailed, examination of Cantwell Smith's point about religious reification may help us reach a deeper grasp of what is at stake. "Concepts, terminology, and attention shift from personal orientation to an ideal, then to an abstraction, finally to an institution": This means that the understanding of religious phenomena, the words that are used to refer to them, and the existential focus characteristic of religious people, tend to shift through time. We note three stages in this devolutionary process: first idealization, second abstraction, and finally all-embracing institutionalization. The first is akin to a kind of sublimation, which means that, with the passage of time, religious phenomena tend to be considered more and more independently from their existential reality. What is initially a lived and quasi-immediate "spiritual culture" increasingly becomes an "ideal" held above existential and social realities, as the faith within the believing

community fails to be a "given" anymore, no longer "the air one breathes" as experienced in apostolic times. At a second stage, this "ideal" becomes more and more abstract as a set of mental representations. For example, Christianity as a conceptual and dogmatic system tends to be given greater and greater emphasis over faith in Christ. Finally, the belief system that has crystalized as a result of those prior developments becomes almost entirely invested in institutional agencies that appropriate most of its reality.

This process of reification is the reason why Cantwell Smith goes as far even as to reject the very term "religion," the overwhelming use of which he sees as a symptom that something vital has been lost along the way, and consequently why he proposes to replace it with the twin and complementary terms of "faith" and "cumulative tradition." For Cantwell Smith, what both faith and cumulative tradition hold in common is the inner engagement that they involve. Faith calls for a personal awareness and an inner striving toward the object of one's belief. It is the very heart of religious life, upstream of theological developments and downstream of God. [3] As for the cumulative tradition, it lies at the intersection of personal meditation and collective intellectual engagement. It is a transmitted and

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[3] "Theology is part of the traditions, is part of this world. Faith lies beyond theology, in the hearts of men. Truth lies beyond faith, in the heart of God." *The Meaning and End of Religion,* p.185.

living body of collective wisdom and practices that provides faith with

deeper and richer civilizational and cultural substance, from theology and

ceremonial elaborations to forms of civility and the arts. [4]

For Olivier Roy, like for Cantwell Smith, there is no such thing as

an abstract "pure religion," if by this term is meant a reality disengaged

from a manifold of socio-cultural productions. Any living or lived religion

presupposes some sort of cultural "formatting." As soon as a primordial

religious community develops as an encompassing religious society, or

when the latter overshadows the former, a necessary process cultural

formatting is taking hold. Granted, a religious community can be

temporarily in a state of antagonism toward the ambient culture from

within which it emerges; and it is so to a large extent in apostolic times,

like in both cases of Christianity and Islam. But even when it is so, not all

of the elements of the ambient culture are excluded, but only those that

stand in opposition to the new religious principles. Other elements, by

contrast, are taken into the fold of religion, which is formatted to that

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[4] "The cumulative tradition, then, of what has been called religion and each particular religion is dynamic, diverse, and observable. (...) It is not a unit. **By the very words 'cumulative' and 'tradition'** I have meant to stress that the concept refers in a synthetic shorthand to a growing congeries of items each of which **are unified in the conceptualizing** mind, by a process of intellectual abstraction." *The Meaning and End of Religion,* p.168..

effect.

Besides this acculturating aspect of "formatting," Olivier Roy also makes use of the term to refer to the specific context of globalization. Formatting has therefore two meanings, one general and another particular and specific to the post-modern context. In the first sense religion is always formatted to fit the needs of a particular culture. It is necessarily mediated by culture, and is therefore manifested through a socio-cultural "formatting" which functions as a principle of socio-religious integration. In the context of globalization formatting takes quite a different meaning. It does not integrate religious universals to assimilate them into specific cultures. In fact, on the contrary, it universalizes an abstraction of religion by divesting it from anything cultural, and it does so by means of propagandizing oversimplification, global modes of proselytization, and technological means of diffusion.

The thesis of this presentation is that contemporary religion can be understood as the intensification and reactivation of the reifying and formatting processes described by Cantwell Smith and Roy. This is achieved, on the one hand, through a course of "ideologization," *and* on the other hand as a result of the growing impact of opposite de-reifying and de-formatting trends characteristic of revivalist and charismatic neo-religious movements, in ways which can be approximated by the terms

"individualization" and "psychologization." On the one hand, we can see reification taking the reactivated and increased form of ideologization, with formatting moving away, as a consequence or in parallel, from a principle of cultural integration to one of global disintegration. On the other hand, we can note the growing impact of anti-dogmatic, anti-institutional and anti-intellectual currents within religious movements standing out against reifying and formatting models by highlighting and extolling the subjective singularity of experience. In both cases, "global formatting" functions by and large as a de-culturating process, since the focus is either the universal ideological "creed" or the individual as a culture-free locus of experience. Sometimes even we attend a paradoxical convergence of the two patterns.

Reification can be deemed to find its exacerbated form in "fundamentalist" systematization. While reification refers, in Cantwell Smith's analysis, to a gradual moving away from a focus on inner faith, fundamentalism can be deemed to be its ultimate outcome through its relentless emphasis on agendas of formal creeds, prescriptions and proscriptions. Ideologization intensifies this fundamentalist course of reification by focusing on its power as means of socio-political transformation. This "natural" shift from reifying fundamentalism to ideologization is illustrated, for instance, by the discrete steps but also

gradual continuum, between religious puritanical reformism, political religious activism, and violently militant forms of religious ideology.

By contrast with, or against, the reifying and largely oppressive trends of religious ideology, which tends to function as a totalitarian system through militant activism, the psychologization of religion is lived as a liberation from outer constraints, including religious ones. It finds its source in a natural sense of ease and freedom from physical and psychological inhibitions or, in a more directly religious mode, in a spirit that manifests itself without constraints and free from the human shackles of rational discernment. The New Age constellation and most of the forms of holistic neo-spirituality pertain to the first model, whereas the revivalist and charismatic movements are representative of the second.

What characterizes the most recent developments in religion is, in this respect, the individualistic thrust of the vision of truth that they tend to involve. The individual is the locus of definition and realization of the truth. This can take two different ways, when either individual judgment is substituted for traditional magisterium, or emotional experience overrides ritual mediation. Thus, it is thought that a free exercise of individual reason is able to discover the principles of action present in scriptures, this process of discovery being both individual and dialogical. In other words, it does not require a magisterium or a traditional training,

while holding a collective dimension. The individual is the locus of interpretation and choice, but the group also plays a facilitating through a non-hierarchical and egalitarian dialogical communication. This largely differs from cumulative tradition, which is essentially a transmitted body of collective wisdom requiring traditional training and authority, in which learned and inspiring individuals play a seminal, normative and authoritative role. Thus, contrary to contemporary group study of scriptures, for example, traditional access to scriptures requires an aggregation to a scholastic tradition through formal, guided study and a process of authorization. This is true in legal and theological matters as it is *mutatis mutandis* in spiritual or esoteric domains.

The second type of focus of the individual is emotional and experiential. Here, as exemplified in charismatic movements, dogmas, institutions, theological developments and hierarchies, and even ritual practices, are considered as obstructing or betraying individual faith and the inspiration by the Spirit. The latter is primarily defined as an experience, and indeed an experience grounded in the "irreplaceable singularity" of the individual. The collective plays an important role here as well, although it is largely amorphous and effusively or ecstatically bonding, not dialogical, since it functions as an emotional amplifier of the individual experience.

Taken as a whole, formatted religious ideologization results from the challenges and socio-cultural and economic crises brought about by globalization. It can be analyzed as an outcome of the destruction of traditional and cultural identities that began with the industrial revolution, the colonialist era, and finally the entrance into the age of global economy and technology. It is a fruit of this process, in which it belongs and participates in its own ways, and it is also in other ways a reaction against it, hence its contradictions and aberrations. It functions on the mode of a resistance that is all the more violent as it is powerless, all the more powerless as 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 some of its most important features. Against the reifying and oppressive trends of religious ideology, the psychologization of religion is first of all an individual, if not individualistic, phenomenon. It proceeds from the point of view that religion is a personal, and often private, matter, these priorities referring to an unconstrained individual freedom from outer religious concepts, practices and institutions. In that sense, like religious ideologization, it is largely, or totally, a de-culturated phenomenon. Thus, there is no belief in the need for sacred and traditional forms that would operate, or at least facilitate, a spiritual and moral transformation. The individual is free to receive or create his or her own forms of spirituality, or to understand and

make use of existing forms in his or her own way. He or she is even invited to combine elements selected from different sources.

What we see, clearly, in most new religious movements is a move toward an increasingly individual scope of decision and focus on the one hand, and a growing socio-political area of definition on the other hand. These two directions reveal tensions, or at times even oppositions, in contemporary religious life, since an individualist style of spirituality tends to resist religious and ideological collective and institutional pressures, while religious projects of collective and social transformation hardly tolerate deviance from their formal and totalizing goals. But it is also true, however, that the two trends can sometimes coalesce, as when the ideological project is the standard bearing power in a personal odyssey of breaking away from one's society and culture, or when individualistically inspired religious piety outpours into collective mass manifestations seen as socially transformative. The first coalescence is perhaps more representative of some segments of contemporary Islam, while the second may characterize more fittingly a number of new charismatic Christian churches.

A final point is that contemporary religiosity is characterized by a bent to return to a lost original purity, to a contemporary understanding of the modes of operation of the apostolic times. Pentecostalism claims to revive the spiritual modalities of early Christians and make them central to contemporary piety, while Salafist movements strive to restore the

religious correctness of early Islamic practice and, sometimes even, Islamic society. In neo-Christianity, the main concern appears to replicate the unmediated experience of the redemptive grace of Jesus in a charismatic way. In Islam, where the structure of the religion is legal and formal, and where the socio-political is initially merged with the religious, it is *sharīʿah* compliance that functions as a first priority, often coupled with militancy in view of the establishment of an Islamic socio-political order conceived as a reduplication of the ideal of Medina. This focus on *sharīʿah* is conceived either in a revivalist way --like the re-Islamicization program of *Tablighi Jamaat*-- or in a socio-political modes--with Islamist movements, or else a combination of the two. Even new extra-religious spirituality, like Eckhart Tolle's teachings for instance, often sees itself as restoring religious ideas and contemplative practices to their true and original meaning. This desire, or nostalgia, for original purity bears witness to a contemporary need for any sort of absolute anchoring in principles, forms and values that the disorders, uncertainties and upheavals of the age make one feel all the more urgently needed; the ways and means of such urgent anchoring being often, therefore, all too slapdash and ostensible not to result, quite deplorably, in confusing wastage and chaotic self-destruction.