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WHEN RELIGIOUS INDIFFERENCE BUILDS IDENTITY

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Abstract

Starting from the writings of Félicité de la Mennais, the article aims to analyze religious indifference as an important coordinate of the current identity profile. Finding its roots in the skepticism of humanistic thinking and in the interpretive approaches that try to elaborate rational explanations, religious indifference is, in the end, the consequence of a life choice. It can manifest itself in radical forms and in this sense, we have identified fundamentalist indifference as an expression of an intellectual manifestation that is imposed on society in an ideological way based on an artificial dichotomy between sacred and profane. All this offers a new, objectifying paradigm within which the definition of homo religious is built. Thus, religious difference accumulates a series of behaviors that subscribe to the centrality of personal experience.

Keywords: religious indifference, modernity, secularism, fundamentalist indifference

Résumé

À partir des écrits de Félicité de la Mennais, l'article vise à analyser l'indifférence religieuse comme une coordonnée importante du profil identitaire actuel. Trouvant ses racines dans le scepticisme de la pensée humaniste et dans les approches interprétatives qui tentent d'élaborer des explications rationnelles, l'indifférence religieuse est, en définitive, la conséquence d'un choix de vie. Elle peut se manifester sous des formes radicales et en ce sens nous avons identifié l'indifférence fondamentaliste comme l'expression d'une manifestation intellectuelle qui s'impose à la société d'une manière idéologique basée sur une dichotomie artificielle entre sacré et profane. Tout cela offre un nouveau paradigme objectivant au sein duquel se construit la définition de l'homo religiosus. Ainsi, la différence religieuse accumule une série de comportements qui souscrivent à la centralité de l'expérience personnelle.

Mots-clés: indifférence religieuse, modernité, laïcité, indifférence fondamentaliste

Rezumat

Plecând de la scrierile lui Félicité de la Mennais articolul își propune să analizeze indiferența religioasă ca o coordonată importantă a profilului identitar actual. Aflându-și rădăcinile în scepticismul gândirii umaniste și în demersurile interpretive care încearcă să elaboreze explicații raționale, indiferența religioasă este, în cele din urmă, consecința unei alegeri de viață. Ea se poate manifesta în forme radicale și am identificat în acest sens indiferența fundamentalistă ca expresie a unei manifestări intelectuale ce se impune societății în manieră ideologică pe baza unei artificiale dihotomii între sacru și profan. Toate acestea oferă o paradigmă nouă, obiectivantă în interiorul căreia se construiește

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definiția lui homo religiosus. Astfel, idiferența religioasă cumulează o serie de comportamente ce se subînscriu centralității experienței personale.

Cuvinte cheie: indiferență religioasă, modernitate, secularism, indiferența fundamentalistă

1. Secularization and religious indifference in society

Despite the fact that, apparently, a time is open to analysis for which religious reflection is no stranger, religious indifference is gaining ground on the background of secularization and intellectual debates of contemporary thinking shape the world in large areas, favorable to irreligiousness.

I will begin by referring to an old author who initiated a lucid debate about religious indifference generated by the secularist tendencies of his own time, and then move on to the mechanisms that generated religious indifference, without avoiding, at least in passing, to take a look at the methodological birth of the study of religion and the way in which it contains in the center of the research the idea of indifference to the sacred, sanctity, transcendence, etc. as levels of reality.

Félicité de la Mennais questioned the world of her time in the famous “Essai sur l’indifférence en matière de religion” (1817) about the reasons that compose the religious indifference, denouncing the “lethargia” and the “brutal indifference” of Europe. Invoking the idea of “indifference”, de la Mennais saw it not only as a manifestation of the deism, that shaped European humanism, but also as an expression of a thought that, through spiritual laziness (*la paresse*) and convenience works to its own “alienation”(Damour, 2003, p. 390). De la Mennais began his introduction with the following words: “The sickest century is not the one who is passionate about error, but the century that neglects and despises the truth.” (Mennais, 1819, p. 1) For de la Mennais, who saw religious indifference in a relationship of dependence on atheism, indifference cannot be understood as a doctrinal model, but as a state of mind. According to this view,

„People who are really indifferent do not deny anything and do not affirm anything; they do not even have doubts; for doubts, as a state of suspension between opposing probabilities, presupposes a prior examination; it is a question of a systematic ignorance, a voluntary sleep of the soul, which exhausts its vigor to resist its own thoughts, a universal numbness of the moral faculties, an absolute deprivation of ideas in relation to what is most important for a man to know.” (Mennais, 1819, p. 24)

In reality, for the indifferent, the idea of true or false religion is really irrelevant. It exists as a social fact and its content can be received, at most, in its form as a cultural device. Obviously, the indifference in a century of disinterest in religion has gained in splendor, ending up being trivialized and transformed into a natural attitude. Intellectual debates that highlighted the idea that God is a creation of subjectivity will have themselves transformed into fashions and patterns that spanned the centuries to postmodernity.

In Christian antiquity, St. Paul initiated the debate over the issue of inner removal from any reference that grounded inner identity according to the

revealed Truth. Addressing the Romans (Rom. 12: 2) not to conform to historical time, that is, not to conform to the “age” and its axiological consequences, transformed into foundations *viewed as natural*, St. Paul uses the word *saeculum* (a notion that translates the Greek *aion* into the Vulgate), indicating precisely *the meaning of the temporal dimension of the present world associated with the progressive and total removal from the Truth*. Pauline’s reflection introduced the idea that thinking or living *in accordance with the age* or, if you will, with empty patterns of the sacredness of time, presupposes folding on its profane dimensions. In principle, Paul suggests that these dimensions, emptying the mechanisms of thought of any possible reference to the transcendent and the sense of the sacred, consequently impose a historical experience in accordance with the meanings that the *profane* imprints on life. For precise identification of what the concept of “profane” implies, it lets us remember that it *refers to what is not consecrated*, more precisely, to what is “in front” (*pro*) of a consecrated place (*fanum*). According to hermeneutics. proposed by Giorgio Agamben, “to profane means the return to common use that which has been removed to the sphere of the sacred” (Agamben, 2007, p. 82).

In a certain way, the experience of the profane “is the counter-device which restores for common use what has been consecrated (*sacrare*)”. (Agamben, 2006, p. 31) Agamben insists on the idea that living to profane is more precisely a

„restitution which supposes a preliminary subtraction, that operated by the sacralization. A double movement appears, producing an inside-outside: to make the profane sacred - a movement that creates an inside - and to make the sacred profane - a movement that creates an outside. These are the devices which, for the author, remove from the original free use “a pure place freed from sacred names”; it is the devices that confiscates, captures, separates. Any device creates a secular-sacred caesura.” (Charrier, 2010, p. 69)

It has already become commonplace that, from a socio-human perspective, secularization is identified with the exclusion of the gnoseological dimension of faith from social life in favor of other models of knowledge. The dimension of *faith*, as a reality that refers to the idea that the spiritual order constitutes in itself another plane of existence and refers to this plan, is perceived as a notion that does not rationally cover a discernible reality. Following the same model of validating reality, the exercise of *believing*, as an action correlative to faith, is perceived as an epistemological invalid and received in the sense of a subjective tendency of a reason that tends to map reality whenever faced with reaching the ultimate limit of understanding. As a result of the epistemic invalidation of the model based on the exercise of *believing*, taken in the sense of experience that underlies the *faith*, the scientific model (received as the refined solution in terms of which the spiritual reference is useless) will be imposed as the only dimension capable of making hypotheses and conclusions about the nature of reality. In the long term, the practical consequences of the deconstruction of the idea of faith are given the right to homeland until they become natural, insofar as the pursuit

of the process that initiates and builds this revolution begins in Christian antiquity. First, the semantic dissolution of the notion of the sacred is operated within the social consciousness and, finally, the natural deconstructive process becomes active which generates indifference in the personal consciousness towards representations that refer to any ontological reception of the idea of sacred.

This process, specific to a modernity that, from the will to think with its own mind, keeps a constant distance from what Jung called “the quest for wholeness and the act of faith”(Tardan-Masquelier, 1998, p. 238-242) and whose stages in the construction of distancing by deconstructing the search for the “act of faith” can be traced from antiquity to modernity ends in the belief that the history and moral evolution of humanity, as well as of any dimension of existence, are (and must be) understood by themselves - starting only from them, by visualizing them as mere cultural devices - and not by reference to the idea of transcendence.

In principle, at the sociological level, secularization and religious indifference, its corollary, enshrines the diminishing influence of religion in society. Obviously, neither secularization nor indifference necessarily presupposes the radical loss of the sense of the sacred, but only its expulsion to the periphery of reflection. In fact, Carl Schmitt saw the emergence of political concepts developed by modernity as secularized theological forms and concepts (Schmitt, 1922). At the level of consciousness, reporting to a certain level of presence of the sacred is an exercise that continues to remain active. The double movement that Agamben invokes, that is, the “inside-outside” movement, to make the profane sacred and to make the sacred profane, does not cease. Secularization involves changing this perspective of the natural slide from the sacred to the profane and from the profane to the sacred, by developing an ideological language that seeks to block the process in a framework of total separation.

In other words, any notion that presupposes the sense of the sacred, that “sends” from a continuum “inside-outside” or “suggests” it would be explained only by itself. Emptying the process of the support of interiority which maintains it through the relation “inside-outside”, is expelled the idea of the sacred, understood in a transcendent sense in order to make it disappear even from the notion which contained it. In itself, the process bases its principles on the theory of the ambiguity of the sacred, which finds its first formulation in William Robertson Smith’s *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889). Agamben notes that the theory of the ambiguity of the sacred, formulated at the end of the Victorian era and then passed on to French sociology, does not seem surprising “that these *Lectures* correspond to the moment in which a society that had already lost every connection to its religious tradition began to express its own unease”(1997, p. 85, 1998, p. 49).

2. Fundamentalist indifference

The transcendent destiny of the human being and the debate related to the presence of an absolute reference in existence are no longer of interest even at the intellectual level of problematization, of principled interrogation. We are faced with *l'homo indifferens*, whose idea of God or of life seen through the grid of the sacred no longer crosses the questions. The disinterest in this type of issue is visible and when the interest in it exceeds the condition that installed it in the habit, the risk is to reject it with the means of aggression. The belief that there is no transcendent reference to existence, that it is impossible to speak of a transcendent human destiny, turns into a more or less intellectual form of aggression. When indifference transgresses the primary level of what founds it, which is ignoring the idea of transcendence (Brechon, 2020), and ideologically constructing its premises, then it becomes another facet of fundamentalism. In fact, we cannot avoid an obvious aspect, namely that fundamentalism is the manifestation of a belief. Or, indifference is itself an attitude founded on a non-reflective belief, that of believing that you are right without reflecting through an analytical process on the object you deny. Denial can concern God, just as it can target the moral utility of religion, the sense of the sacred experienced within the being's intimate intimacy, and so on.

The idea of the uselessness of this reference turns the one who supports it into a fundamentalist. He imposes his beliefs with the same aggressiveness as his religious fundamentalist imposes his own, even going so far as to exclude those who oppose him. To him, God is an unimportant notion. It is true, we must reflect on the reasons that generated this social indifference that does not necessarily build the daily life of the person who has or does not have reflective, intellectual habits. Let us point out that the religious indifferent can himself be an intellectual accustomed to reflection.

3. Religious indifference and modernity

One might think that the theological adventure of reflecting in various philosophical and hermeneutical ways has generated a problematic process of turning against the faith, understood as the foundation of the one who proposed this reflection. In order to explain the genesis of religious indifference, I do not want to give so much importance to the errors of interpretation of theological modernity that has ventured interpretatively beyond the field of reference specific to theology. They are the subject of historiographical (Ramm, 1970, p. 93-184) research even for the traditional Protestant patterns that have ventured into this space of reflection. However, it should be noted that the theological interpretation was constructed in accordance with interpretive models of the time. The theologian or spiritualist philosopher of the 16th-18th centuries, faithful to the theological space to which he belonged, could reflect theologially only in accordance with the thinking of the century that framed his reflection (Tillich, 1995, p. 23-49). Religious indifference does not, therefore, arise from the

misinterpretations of theology (however, this is another subject for reflection), but from the skepticism of humanistic thinking (Moreau, 2001), which had reached its rationalist and anti-ecclesiastical heights in the 17th and 18th centuries and which subtly framed theological interpretation (Goff, 2017, p. 281-397). My conviction is that religious indifference rests on the processes which structure the interpretive mentality of these centuries (Lagrée, 1991). Henri de Lubac saw the rejection of the idea of the natural desire to see God as the source of the divide between the Christian message and the contemporary world, from which, for him, religious indifference stems (Lecuit, 2017, p. 25-50; Lubac, 1998). In fact, the exclusion of the reference of the sacred and the theological from the area of thought, as well as the attempt to find rational explanations for the traditional and personal God of Christian thought, begins in non-theological areas.

Even if religious indifference seems based on a certain type of reflection, it remains, in its fundamental constitution, the consequence of a choice of life within the intellectual history which precedes modernity. The structures of this choice, which gradually became the ideal framework for the man of modernity, can be found fully in the thinking of a whole class of thinkers. In this context, socio-human projects, based on the idea of a freedom that continues to be interpreted, generated a vision as a result, focused on the construction of a model based on the will to find at all costs the solution of “living together” without God. The dominant idea is to find the arguments that underlie the model which excludes any reference to the sacred or to transcendence, fully aware that this remains an impossible social project if man retains in his social conscience the Jungian conviction that living in a “religious attitude” is equivalent to building an *imago Dei* which is a myth of totality accessible to everyone in the interiority of their psyche. “(Tardan-Masquelier, 1998, p. 240)

4. Construction of an artificial dichotomy

One of the great problems raised by the discussion about the sacred is that of its theoretical elimination from the life of the community. The imposition of the distinction between sacred and profane, understood as two absolutely divergent territories of reality, has generated discussions that draw artificial demarcation lines within the world. On the one hand, the profane as a reality opposed to the transcendent, known as realistic, objective, the quintessential source of scientific objectivity, and, on the other hand, the sacred as a dimension representing an imaginary world, a source of human subjectivity. In a way, the sacred begins to be received from the idea of a reason seen as objective, as a notion that refers to possible unfounded representations in the real world. This is where a whole controversy begins, maintained in the literary and philosophical world of the Renaissance, in order to explode with maximum vigor in the anti-religious reflection of the following centuries (Heilbron, 2007, pp. 312-313).

The consequences of this reflection are visible in the thought which has structured the religiosity of modernity. It will be maintained by a class of thinkers

who will have imposed their way of thinking and accepted, consequently, by another class of thinkers, by desire to play the game of objective reason. I am referring here above all to theological reflection which has gradually conformed, through weakness, to the tendency to “adapt” to humanist reflection. I would also like to point out an aspect that is not unimportant, namely that metaphysical-theological thinking has constantly tried to play the game of balance, insisting on the forced relationship between reason and faith. This reflection elaborated - despite the initial project that relied on the idea of conciliation - a discourse in which the two will have already become, in theory, incompatible with each other. The two notions had become incompatible in the deist-agnostic-atheist camp, but the incompatibility will have been built with more vigor by those who will have desperately tried to reconcile them. Gradually, this divorce became a reality accepted even by the theological or philosophical world in favor of the idea of transcendence. The way is thus open to the division of the world of thought.

The European school of social sciences had already prepared all the data to pave the way for a practical dichotomy that defined the world in two. The perspective of empirical scientific research, aiming to explain the sacred starting from social behavior, by totally excluding any reference to the transcendent, was already open. The reductionism practiced by Durkheim and, through it, by the socio-human school, has unsuspected consequences, because identifying a religion based on the *criterion of simplicity* (there is no other society simpler than the one studied) and the *criterion of antiquity* (its explanation is excluded by appealing to a previous religion) (Durkheim, 1995, p. 15) a false anthropological premise that is introduced, which turns into a one-way criterion.

In principle, the functioning of a mechanism cannot be identified only in a *certain* element, indicated as *actually paradigmatic* and explanatory for other mechanisms, first of all, because it is unique. Moreover, starting from the hypothesis that there is a certain graduality in the evolution of forms of religiosity (evolved or less evolved religions), *has introduced the temptation to believe* that the religious phenomenon can be explained by starting from the identification of cause and effect in simple things, to be identified later in complex things and to understand by this how religion works as a whole. (Durkheim, 1995, p. 380)

The critical tendency to indicate religion only as an *eminently social phenomenon* (Durkheim, 1995, p. 22) introduces, concretely, an irreducible opposition between sacred and profane, understood as “*the distinctive feature of religious thought.*” (Durkheim, 1995, p. 45) Or, precisely this opposition, which no longer leaves room for the sacred-profane relationship, suggestively indicated by Agamben as the “inside-outside” movement, tends to operate in the space of subsequent reflection, as a kind of infallible criterion, introducing the idea that the religious world it lacks rational support.

By constantly invoking the idea of objectivity, based mainly on the belief that the sacred belongs to the uncertain domain of subjectivity, one arrives at the situation of defining as objective only what is seen, that is, what appears to sight

and can be verified by palpable experience. In a way, this whole method ends up giving the object a value that it has only in itself and never by reference to a referent. Following such a perspective does not only eliminate the possibility of reporting to an *trans objective*, but the anaphoric relation disappears to a certain extent, reporting that is expressed from “con-science/ with-knowledge” (*sin-eidenai* [συνειδέναι], *con-stientia*) as a fundamental reference relationship. And because consciousness is, in the phenomenological tradition, always “conscious of something” - that is, of a thing -, even intentionality becomes impossible, more precisely, the fact that there is no consciousness without reference to a content. This thinking mechanism develops a manner of reflection that ends in ideology. Jung suggested avant la lettre the mechanism itself when he stated that “for the man of today the enlargement of life and its culmination are plausible goals, but the idea of life after death seems to him questionable or beyond belief”(Jung, 2001, p. 113). In this sense, the refusal of the referent, the classical dichotomy between *sacred* and *profane*, introducing the incompatibility between the two domains - the profane belonging to reality (hence, domain of reality) and the realm of the sacred (domain of subjectivity) - remain in a hierarchical relationship devoid of fecundity. As long as indifference to the sacred manifests itself as objectivity in relation to the experience of living in the only world that can be objectified, through an analysis suggested with the attribute of “rational” (which excludes the sentimental component of a consciousness that perceives the world from its reflection in the space that contains it, intuition, *intentionality*), then indifference, which turns into attitude, becomes itself a form of fundamentalism. Founding a theory about the world, indifference imposes this theory as the only solution to reflect on reality by even refusing to give importance to another realm of reality, other than positioning itself *as indifference* to sacred reality.

5. The world enclosed in an infinite space

Religious indifference focuses mainly on the issue of man's transcendent destiny. Therefore, religious indifference sees any religion as a mechanism with elements of similarity, in the sense that any religion would propose the same problematic reference, possibly eliminated by its very lack of objectivity. In this sense, God is only a hypothetical explanation of the world that can be eliminated. In fact, the cosmological reflection of the Deist century founded its perspectives by invoking convinced that the “hypothesis of God” could be removed from the calculation. Only the so-called objectivity would be important, generated by the reason able to understand itself and, from this project, to understand through mechanisms of interpretation, defined as “objectives”, the other dimensions of the world. The farther away these dimensions are from what is offered to reason, as an objective, thus they lose their importance and become secondary concerns until the moment when they completely disappear from the horizon of the preoccupations. God and the transcendent destiny of the human being are no longer part of these concerns because reason, received as an objective tool for understanding the world, no longer perceives them as objective realities, but as

mere assumptions of a mind that has forgotten its focus on objectivity. In fact, this world is closed in its own horizontal dimension that constantly takes into account only what is offered. Within a material globality and an intellectual subjectivism, generated by the feeling of a reason constantly received as objective in understanding the order of the world, which can only be material, regardless of its degree of subtlety. Despite a whole phenomenology that claims the opposite, even the last function of a psychic interior architecture is, in this perspective, seen only as a subtle reality of a material dimension that supports and explains itself.

I propose in the perspective stated above, the evaluation of a paradox that invites reflection: Concentrating in a whole argumentative system the will that accompanies this way of thinking the world, focused, in turn, on indifference to transcendence, when the rationalist indifferent makes its limits known, he focuses, in fact, on the same area as the one he ignores: the spiritualist thinker. He will return to circular arguments, which support each other, but do not support the whole. The inability to support the whole argument paradoxically generates another form of fundamentalism, I would say a kind of despair - forcing from a non-existent objectivity - a contentment mixed with the despair of not being able to convince. The discourse that locks itself in itself is born here. It can be noticed that the religiously indifferent man can enter into a kind of narrative impasse that borders on fundamentalism. Religious indifference intellectually focused can be so aggressive sometimes so that fundamentalism becomes its force of expression and the form of expression typical of intellectual fundamentalism is the socially imposed *ideology*.

In reality, the culture of modernity - understanding here and that of contemporary modernity (avoiding me to call it "post-modernity" because I would not know how to call later models) - is built on models already rooted in the culture of religious indifference.

In this perspective, the pragmatic view of religious pluralism, present in the tendency to give an ideological content to the habit of sustaining, until the fall into idolatry, the preeminence of reason in any kind of construction, which evaluates the objects of thought, translates a "practical agnosticism" modeled, in fact, in what might be called a "dogma of indifference" or "an ignorance of the desire of God", gradually transformed in a "culture of indifference" (Damour, 2003, p. 393).

Obviously, without considering the quintessential characteristic phenomenon of modernity (Piétri, 2004, p. 206), religious indifference must be related to the significance of the hypothesis of "return of the religious", which signals "the end of a period too soon considered the normal and irreversible evolution of the world to the triumph of the light of reason on the obscurity of the faith" (Donegani, 2008, p. 40). Frédéric Lenoir already finds that the emergence of an "alternative religiosity" is a typical symptom of "post-modernity", which favors, through a non-reflective process, the acceptance of a more or less anonymous deity instead of a personal God (Lenoir, 2003, p. 304-305,

344, 364). In fact, within this process, modernity plays its whole piece because “none of the inventions of modernity is excluded and, even more so, the individualization of elections. What remains important is the will to overcome a rational degraded in rationalism and unleashing the potential of the intuitive, imaginary, and mystical side systematically hidden” (Piétri, 2004, p. 206).

Thus, the new definitions of *homo religiosus* are built within the mental patterns, shaped by this religious indifference, which remains, paradoxically, religious in its intentions and ideologically unreligious, even of a passionate agnostic order. Obviously, as this new configuration will be imposed in the form of an indifferentism going so far as to reach the form of a rational atheism as an oppositional structure to theistic thinking, gradually its presence will be configured in the form of a true humanism. This is the humanism of which Henri de Lubac studied the dramatic effects (Lubac, 1998).

In fact, the paradox that is built within this structure of thinking is visible even in the birth of a relativism that is not generated by a reflexive intervention, which would consider that all religions are valid and that none can say that it has a monopoly on the truth. Donegani suggests that indifference can be perceived “as a possible implication of contemporary subjectivism that leads everyone to choose the meanings they hold to be true”, founded, consequently, “by this respect which enjoys a priori all conviction, his own like that of others” and transformed into experience “as a response, at least in part, to the contemporary injunction of being oneself.” (Donegani, 2015, p. 231) If at first glance, Donegan's observation does not seem to fundamentally suggest the idea of religious indifference, it is nevertheless the image of a vision that brings to the surface its distance and its consequences from the idea of Truth. In fact, this pattern of thinking is not in search of meaning, because its representative perceives the problem of meaning as irrelevant. If the various religious structures are equalized, the equalization takes place from the perspective of an indifference to what the religious experience implies, which fundamentally refers to the idea of meaning. The religious way of thinking of the indifferent (because indifference has its own mechanism of believing), does not incorporate the idea of “reference to something”. The religious indifferent entrusts itself to its own perspectives, which do not integrate and do not relate to a classical system of religiously founded values. For him, any religiously founded system of values is a framework, which founds other frameworks, all centered around a hypothetical meaning, which remains undetectable within the reality he lives. The belief that there is no meaning generates indifference even within this return of the religious, which is, in fact, a hypothetical return.

In principle, the return of the religious and the participation of the religious indifferent in this “fragmented” world is a new form of manifestation of the secularized religious. Religious indifference imposes its way of believing, which, in the view of the actor who practices it, is no less important than any other way of believing. In a way, all forms of behavior of religious indifference are subscribed to the centrality of personal experience. More specifically, from

the vital importance of personal experience in a society in which the idea of objectivity (acquired non-reflexively) will have already gained absolute ground, it builds the attitude towards any referent of a religious nature. The religious referent is invalid for the religious indifferent, not because its structures have been analyzed and deconstructed to exhaustion, but because by virtue of the idea of objectivity, in which he often participates, by proxy, he believes that any religious structure is invalid in itself. When he states that all religions are identical, his statement must be seen from this perspective.

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