

Yeshayahu Leibowitz on the possibility of religious subjectivity: Critique and defense

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A. Preface

The question that will be discussed in this paper is whether one's individual subjectivity can be religious, i. e. be molded by a religious faith and worship. I shall do this by applying to the thinking of Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903-1994), one of the most original and challenging Jewish thinkers of our time.¹ The revolution he caused in the understanding of Judaism was compared to that of Writgenstein, Kierkegaard, and even to the Copernican revolution of Kant. Hence he is undoubtedly one of the most original and challenging Jewish thinkers of the 20th century.² The uniqueness of his approach stems from the fact that as an orthodox-Jew he was totally committed to God's commandments (Mitzvot)³, but by the same token, he rejected the traditional theology and metaphysics that had historically accompanied the Jewish Religion (metaphysics which included an information about the creation of the world and its inhabitants, about God as the ruler of human reality, miracles etc.).⁴ In his thinking he combines an extreme voluntarism as the indispensable

1) Except for a single volume (henceforth: Judaism), in which few of his classic articles were translated into English, all Leibowitz' writings appeared only in Hebrew. All the translations from the Hebrew sources are mine.

2) The discussion will expose to Leibowitz' thinking as dealing with the challenges of modernity. Yet, as already acknowledged in the literature (mainly in Hebrew), many aspects refer directly to the post-modern era.

3) The Hebrew term *Mitzvot* is translated here as God's commandments and refers to the divine imperative. In the Jewish tradition there is a distinction between written commandments to oral ones – the former are taken from the Pentateuch (Torah) and the latter were produced by a continuous historical process of interpretation of the former which was oriented towards deduction of detailed practical norms. However, both kinds are equally binding to believers.

4) The project of eliminating metaphysics of any kind from religious faith has far-reaching implications that can be seen as independent of Leibowitz' concept of the believer. For instance, it raises questions about the character of God towards whom the religious faith is directed, about the origins of religious authority and about many other fundamental themes with regard to religion. Needless to say, these issues are interconnected. These will

condition to any religious belief, with a heteronomic understanding of God's commandments, namely an imperative that is directed to God as another being beyond one's self. In other words, without one's initial free will to believe, there can be no religious experience. Yet after the decision has been taken, in the praxis itself, the believer is asked to put aside his free will and even the entire realm of individuality out of which that will stemmed, and to commit himself totally to those commandments. Consequently, Leibowitz' voluntarism is dismissed in the religious praxis and ends in formalism and deductivism, to the extent that the praxis finally identified with the religious faith itself.

The following discussion will take the challenge of elucidating the implications of the above depicted concept of a religious faith on the believer, namely on the person who practices religion and regards himself as a believer. The question will be simply: what sense can there be in a conception of religious faith, which on the one hand acknowledges the indispensable part of the individual in the very constitution of faith but on the other hand demands elimination of his whole individual being within the praxis that realizes the faith itself? In other words, can one's own subjectivity remain detached and uninfluenced by the demanding routine of the religious praxis, such as that of Judaism? Leibowitz' positive answer, which will be discussed after an exposition of his idea of religious faith as a volitional decision, suggests a critique of the possibility of religious subjectivity. For him subjectivity cannot be religious or affected by religion and hence the believer does not lose his individuality on account of his faith. Nevertheless, the problems that arise from Leibowitz' position, to which the discussion will point subsequently, will illuminate the difficulty, if not impossibility, of maintaining it. Therefore, the critique of Leibowitz' view will suggest a defense of the possibility of religious subjectivity or, better, of the view that regards one's subjectivity as inherent to his/her religious faith.

B. Faith as a volitional decision

The main information concerning the believer in Leibowitz' writings depicts a person who has decided out of free will to accept the whole frame of God's commandments – a decision that can be taken by a secular person or, in case of one who was educated religiously, as a grown up person. In any event, the decision to

not be elucidated below, but for the present suffice it to point that the elimination of metaphysics is merely a refusal to accept any kind of theoretical or speculative reasoning as part of the religious faith, including such that refer to the believer. For the discussed project see: Sagit, 1997a.

believe is an indispensable condition for the very constitution of the religious way of life in which will be realized God's commandments.

Allegedly, Leibowitz' argument that the decision to believe stems from one's individuality may enable using the study of that act as a gateway to the understanding of the believer's individual personality. Yet, this stance needs a justification, for it is quite obvious that not every act of will, can be considered as a means to access one's personality. Therefore, what is demanded in the first place is a clear distinction between the will to believe, which is a free will as it represents »an obligation that one imposes upon himself« (*Faith*, 11), to other one's wills. For the present, Harry Frankfurt's distinction between two kinds of wills – »First-order desire« and »Second-order desire« – can be of a value for understanding how one's free will can testify to his personality. Whereas the former relate to human being's motives which are common also to other »members of certain other species« and basically are designed to satisfy biological needs, the latter are »particularly characteristic of humans« or persons as such.⁵ »Someone has a desire of second order when he wants simply to have a certain desire or when he wants a certain desire to be his will«. In other words, desire of second order takes place whenever one wants a certain desire »to be effective – that is to provide the motive in what he actually does«. ⁶ Logically the fact that human beings may experience desire of second order shows that »they are capable of wanting to be different ... from what they are«. ⁷ To conclude, one's ability to identify himself with a certain will and the fact that such will may generate changes in his / her personality and life, which underlies Frankfurt's idea of desire of second order, supplies a substance to elucidate the subjectivity of the religious person out of his/her will to believe.

Nonetheless, Frankfurt's analysis of the free will cannot be adopted completely to the present discussion, for it does not include within itself the demand to realize the practical implementations that emerges from a desire of second order.⁸ For Leibowitz, a severance between the will to believe and the realization of God's commandments will void the will to believe of any meaning. According to him »Faith in Judaism is the religion of Mitzvot [commandments], and apart from this religion Jewish faith does not exist« (*Judaism*, 38). Hence, though he shared with Frankfurt the idea of free will which cannot be imposed by any facts or rational reasoning, for Leibowitz freedom does not refer to the practical implementations of that will but ends exactly once the decision has been taken. However, this reserva-

5) Frankfurt 1971, 6.

6) *Ibid.*, 10.

7) *Ibid.*, 7.

8) Frankfurt terms such cases as »wanton« and clarifies that by such a position one does not turn out to be an animal that has only »first-order desires«. See: Frankfurt 1971, 11.

tion abolishes the relevance of Frankfurt's understanding of desire of second order as representing persons to the analysis of Leibowitz' idea of faith.⁹

Nonetheless, there is still a difficulty in progressing in the understanding of the subjectivity of the believer, since, according to Leibowitz, not only can one not trace back the roots of the decision to believe, also the believer is an individualist whose decision cannot be influenced. He stated that »Even if one could be absolutely certain that the world was created by the will of God, and that He liberated our forefathers from Egypt, and that He revealed Himself to them on Mount Sinai ... one may still refuse to serve God« (*Judaism*, 75). That is to say that even when the proof of the religious faith seems certain, one can still reject it or at least overlook the practical norms that come out of it – two options that for Leibowitz means one and the same thing. It transpires, then, that since the decision to believe is not an outcome of external circumstances, it is not predictable and not predictable. Therefore, it is impossible to come to terms with connection between the actuality by which the believer is surrounded and his decision to believe. Actually, the possibility that such a connection does not exist at all was not explicitly rejected by Leibowitz, who constantly employed restricted language about faith.

«I know no ways to faith other than faith itself... I do not regard religious faith as a conclusion. It is rather an evaluative decision that one makes, and, like all evaluations, it does not result from any information one has acquired, but is commitment to which one binds himself...»

No method can guide him to this [decision]. Nothing he could experience would lead him to faith if faith did not spring from his own decision and resolve... It is not nature or history that gives origin to religious faith. In that case, faith could have no meaningful value. It would impose itself on man even as the findings of science impose themselves on any mind that understands them, leaving no room for choice, deliberation, and decisions (Judaism, 37-38).

The argument that the individual background is closed before any observation remains valid also in case of a person who can express the considerations he took into account before his decision to accept God's commandments, for the one who believes in its fruitfulness. Yet, those same considerations will have a different meaning for another believer or even in a different period in the lifetime of the same believer. This is the inescapable nature of a decision that does not stem from objective data and hence cannot be explicated.

In Leibowitz' writings one can find two kinds of reasoning for his extreme understanding of the individuality. The first refer to the biblical history, claiming that

9) For further discussion, see Peter Berger's analysis of the centrality of the personal autonomy in modern religion, see: Berger 1974, 196; Berger 1979, 1-31; Sokol 1992.

even though the Bible is full of miraculous proof of the existence of God as well as attempts to persuade people to believe, those attempts failed totally.

*«Scriptural historiography teaches us that events in which the finger of God is incontestably manifest do not inevitably lead to faith and service of God. The generations that witnessed wonders and miracles in Egypt ... did not believe. Forty days after the revelation at Sinai they made the golden calf. The prophets who rose in Israel and delivered the word of God did not succeed in influencing even one person to repent. On the other hand, during many periods in Jewish history multitudes of men and women adhered to God and His Torah, and sacrificed their lives even though God was never revealed to them, no prophets rose among them, and miracles were never performed for them ... still they believed. There is no correlation between what occurs in nature or in history ... and man's faith in God and his willingness to serve him« (*Judaism*, 75).*

Leibowitz did not intend to deny neither the occurrence of what he termed »religious facts« (such as world's creation, the revelation at Mount Sinai etc.) nor the important role they played in the collective consciousness of the Jewish people over the history. Though Leibowitz referred especially to historical facts, this stands also for other facts of any kind (natural, psychological, etc.). Like Spinoza in *Tractatus*, Leibowitz rejected the theological interpretation of such facts, claiming that it inescapably rests on human understanding and hence cannot argue for religious validity. In his words: »Historical facts ... per se, are religiously indifferent. No historical event assumes religious meaning unless it is an expression of religious consciousness ... of the participants in the event« (*Judaism and Israel*, 92). Religious meaning can be conferred upon an historical fact, solely when there is a commandment that attributes it with such meaning. To be more precise, only a commandment can indicate that a religious meaning was bestowed upon a certain fact. Hence facts as such cannot speak by themselves of religious meaning.¹⁰

The pronounced distrust of the possible contribution of facts to faith clearly represents Leibowitz' effort to protect the independence of the religious faith from any objectivity and from the external reality. Yet it seems that more profound support of Leibowitz' concept of faith can be elicited from his strong dualistic worldview, which he proclaimed in another context. According to Leibowitz »there is no logical correlation between our concept which refers to things or events of the psychic reality and those which relate to the same in the physical reality ... nothing

10) For a detailed discussion of the meaning of »facts« in Leibowitz' thinking, with a comparison to Wittgenstein concept of language, see: Sagl 1997a, 207. The understanding of meaning as a human product, and the struggle to maintain the separation of it from any divine matter, appears in Leibowitz' thinking as the supreme principle in the Jewish fight against idolatry. Leibowitz emphasized this issue in his interpretation of Maimonides. See: *Maimonides*, 95ff.

can be changed in the physical world because of the psychic reality. On the other hand, my psychic reality, which I know by a direct acquaintance, is totally independent of any physical reality, in any event of logical necessity; ... we do not discover any functional association between these two worlds» (*Science & Philosophy*, 211). In the same context, Leibowitz set that one's wills are comprised of «the intimate realm of ones consciousness». Unlike what can be observed and recognized by everyone, one's wills and the like (wishes, thinking, feelings etc.) cannot be estimated or evaluated. These are known solely to their owner who is familiar with them and does not need any method or guidance in order to know them (*Science & Philosophy*, 210-212). That is to say that one's consciousness concerns his intimate realm, and as such it cannot be communicated with other individuals.

Against this background, one can understand why the will to believe cannot be given to any objectification or reasoning (*Faith*, 62-63). Furthermore, it seems that the will to believe especially uncovered the dualism characteristic to human beings as psycho-physical entities that participate at the same time in two different worlds: internal and external. Religious belief belongs to the first and is excluded from the second. What distinguishes between believers of the same religion is not the religious praxis that is regulated by that religion's authority and leaders and applies equally to all members, but rather their concealed individuality from which one's initial will to believe stems. Believers differ then from each other on the ground of their internal world, i. e. that which separates between human beings as such – believers and non-believers. Though one's individuality appeared to Leibowitz as the indispensable origin of religious belief, it nonetheless cannot be defined by that belief. However, whatever the individual differences between believers, these cannot have any religious validity.

The exclusion of the will to believe from any external observation is backed then by an ontological theory that differentiates between two realms of being in which human beings participate. For Leibowitz considered one's individuality as incapable of communicating itself understandably with other people, and since the will to believe appears in one's thinking as coming precisely from that realm, it transpires then that it is impossible to come to terms with the origin of faith (*Judaism*, 74). In other words, though the entire individuality is involved in one's decision to believe, that decision cannot bear witness to one's personality. Hence, the individuality that is responsible for choosing a life ruled by religious commandments does not become transparent because of that choice. At most, one can speak of it in a negative way, i. e. not observable, not communicative, etc. Thus, in Leibowitz' mind, even a religion like Judaism whose commandments demand so much involvement and co-operation with other practitioners cannot communicate with the believer's personality which finally remains unaffected and independent of the religious experience.

Undoubtedly, the double explanation of the exclusion of the will to believe from rational discourse may serve as an evidence of the feebleness of rationality and objectivity in the face of the phenomenon of religious faith. It is clear that such feebleness cannot be corrected or be overcome by new findings about faith or with the help of newly discovered methods. Yet, the elimination of the individual being from the explanation of faith does not make the will to believe irrational or capricious. Frankfurt rightly contends that one is not allowed to deduce from the equation of the personality with the will that the individual personality is deprived of reason and rationality. For him «it is having second order volitions, and not having second desire generally, that ... is essential to being a person».¹¹ Therefore the very structure of personality presupposes his/her rationality.

Furthermore, it is exactly the absence of any correlation between the two worlds in which human beings participate, i. e. the internal and the external, and the exclusion of the first from the second, that left for Leibowitz no choice, but to identify between the religious belief and the praxis of God's commandments. So he posed, «Faith and worship are born of the resolve and decision of man to serve God, which is the whole of Judaism (*Judaism*, 75). Finally, the will to believe that led to the acceptance of God's commandments as a whole, reveals the decision that the believer has been taken as sharp and clear-cut by its very nature. The meaning of this is twofold: firstly, that decision creates a dramatic change in the believer's life from the normative aspect; from that point on, religious experience is ruled totally by Divine commandments. In addition, it blurs or even casts aside the individual's background that preceded it. Therefore, though the decision to believe is anchored in the believer's individuality, this individuality does not endure in active religious experience. Hence, the reason why there is no use discussing ways towards religious belief stems not only from the fact that once he has taken that decision, no remnant of the original individuality is left but also from the specific nature of the individuality of the believer.

One wonders what were the considerations that supported this extreme conception of the believer in Leibowitz' thinking that distinguished so sharply between one's subjectivity and one's faith? Is it accurate to say that once the decision has been taken, the believer as an individual personality no longer has any impact on his religious experience? Can it be really possible that within the religious praxis no remnant will be left of the being and personality that preceded the decision to believe? What kind of philosophical problem arises from such conception? The following section will be dedicated to uncovering the reasoning for the stance of the believer within the religious praxis in Leibowitz' thinking.

11) Frankfurt 1971, 10. Frankfurt's approach to free will presupposes the important distinction between rationalism and rationality. For a fine discussion of the differences between the two concepts, see: Sagüi 2002, 59-65.

C. The critique of the possibility of religious subjectivity

The understanding of the religious faith as identical with the praxis of God's commandments was designated by Leibowitz both to promote a specific idea of the Jewish religion which is free of the subjectivization and naturalization that would turn it into a human matter, and to defend the believer's right to remain an individual despite his total commitment to an authority external to himself. Logically, if one do not want the religion to be subjective and the subjectivity to be religious, one cannot but split between the religious faith and the individuality of the believer. Hence, in regard to these goals, this strategy that will be exposed as follows seems to have its preliminary justification. However, achieving the severance between these two does not stand for itself but is intended to be constructive for the spirit of Leibowitz' idea of faith to which the strategy itself was aimed.

The first function of the split is the definition of the limits of the realms of discourse according to the spheres of human experience. Three different spheres can be inferred from Leibowitz' thinking, each with its own characteristics: first, there is the individual world of the believer. As we have seen, access to this world is excluded from any kind of reflection or rationality; second, there is the world of religious belief which is ruled by Divine commandments that covers all the religious praxis as well as the instructions for its fulfillment. Finally, there is the natural world that can be accessed by every means developed by human civilization. True, the sphere in which religious life takes place is that of the natural world, «in the world as it is». Moreover, Jewish commandments appear as a program that governs daily life (*Judaism*, 5), which suggests rules and norms that dictate one's eating, mourning, celebrating and so on. Nonetheless, the split between the three spheres is not violated by this fact, for these rules are considered as God-given. Moreover, as will become clear later on, Leibowitz saw the commandments as conflicting with human nature. In any event, Leibowitz' thinking is directed exclusively to the sphere of religious belief. He used to say they that he never discussed »religion« or »religiosity«, but rather Judaism that appears as a particular way of obedience to the Divine commandments (*Judaism*, 64).

One can formulate the first function of the splitting strategy also as a positive aspect of Leibowitz' critique of the idea of religious subjectivity, namely: religion and subjectivity speak different languages, express themselves in dissimilar behavior and demand unlike capabilities:

Therefore, mixing up religiosity with one's subjectivity confuses things that cannot get along together. Leibowitz did not indicate in the present context an abstract problem of violation of imagined borders, but the inescapable influence of one of the main characteristics of modernity, i. e. the split within the human being,

on the religious experience.¹² However, concerning the goals towards which the strategy of the split was aiming, maintaining the borders of each sphere of being appears as an indispensable condition. Yet, this is no more than a formal or necessary condition, but not a sufficient one, for it does little directly to promote the specific meaning of religion and subjectivity to which Leibowitz' thinking was aiming itself.

The second function of the splitting strategy is narrowing and limiting the scope of religious life solely to what is defined by the religious commandments. It is true that in the case of Judaism these cover a vast amount of details. Nevertheless, Leibowitz stressed that outside these borders, the believer is free to conduct himself just like everybody else, namely like a non-believer. Accordingly, the figure of the believer is uncovered as resembling that of the non-believer, except for the part of his life that is ruled by defined commandments. That is to say that the phenomenology of the believer in Leibowitz' thinking is not identical with his general conception of anthropology. As a matter of fact, according to Leibowitz, aspects in one's personality that appear in the phenomenon of religious belief are not expressed in his religious experience as a believer. Leibowitz exemplified the differences between the believer and the non-believer with regard to their attitude to themselves as natural beings.

«The religious person is different from the one who did not accept the authority of heaven or freed himself from that authority, in that he [the religious person] reconciled himself with the fact that he is part of the natural reality which he cannot transcend. His belief ... is not in accord with the objective reality in which he already finds himself and with which he will never be in accord» (Faith, 57).¹³

The present function relates more directly to the content, which fills the religious sphere, and by that also draws near to the positive formulation of Leibowitz' critique of the idea of religious subjectivity. Namely, whereas as a subject one can live with peace with the very fact of being a natural and finite being, as a believer s/he disputes the same fact and strives to connect with infinity. Accordingly, the idea of religious subjectivity appears then as disregarding the fact that a religious person is nonetheless a natural being and hence cannot attend the fight that is demanded from the one who chooses religious faith. Furthermore, by not taking this fact into account, the concept under criticism is not preparing the believer for

12) For general view of the split within modernity see Jaspers' analysis of the impossibility of steadfast life-order, Jaspers 1931, 46-48. For a discussion of this feature in regard to religion, see: Berger 1979, 36f.

13) Other differences between the two are discussed also in: *Judaism*, 142.

the unending struggle that s/he forced to carry on. In contrast to that is Leibowitz' position, which by narrowing and limiting the scope of religion in one's life, not only takes into account the fact that believers unavoidably remain natural beings. Additionally, especially an approach that strives to separate between one's individuality and his/her faith, may decrease the conflict between the two by making room also for non-religious aspects and activities that concern the natural existence.¹⁴ Consequently, a religion that covers a delimited sphere appears as single dimension among others, none of which claim for superiority, let alone exclusivity.

The limited concept of religion appears then as respecting the individuality of the believer and defending it from possible invasion of elements that belong to the religious sphere. Moreover, concerning the divided mind of modernity one can tell that only a narrowed version of religion can have any chance of communicating with people who are not willing anymore to commit themselves to any total authority. Therefore, regarding the modern being, Leibowitz' concept of religious faith can justly be considered as supportive of religion and not as enfeebling it, whereas the concept of religious subjectivity with its inclusive character seems as risking the very possibility of modern man adopting a religious faith.

The third function of the splitting strategy is the compartmentalization of the aforementioned three spheres, which appear then as not only distinguished but also as detached from each other by an unbridgeable gap.¹⁵ The idea of compartmentalization in this context is that though the decision to believe is originated in one's individuality, the commandments themselves were not designated to fulfill any individual need. This is exactly the meaning of religious belief as a transcendental act – it directs the believer to what lies beyond himself/herself and not towards his internal personality or concrete needs. Consequently the believer in Leibowitz' thinking appears as one who functions in two different spheres: natural and religious. The natural sphere contains everything that is connected to the existence and the culture of the believer as a human being. The religious sphere contains everything ruled by the religious imperatives. Leibowitz considers the religious sphere

14) The understanding of Judaism as a religion that does not bar its believers from non-religious aspects of life appears is emphasized in Hartman studies of Maimonides and in Solovitchik. See: Hartman 2000, x-xii; Hartman 2001.

15) The theory of compartmentalization has become common in the current interpretations of the phenomenon of Orthodoxy. See: Liehman 1988, 54-59. It should be noted that Leibowitz' original position did not adopt a narrowed version of Judaism in a modern society model that was more akin to Catholicism. See: »Jewish education in a modern society« (article from 1954), in: *Judaism and Israel*, 37-45. Leibowitz himself did not fully admit a change in his thinking but presented it more as shift of emphasis (he referred to it in a note, see: *Judaism and Israel*, 45). Nevertheless, among Leibowitz' commentators it is quite commonly accepted that a substantial change occurred in his thinking.

not only as external to the natural one, but also as inaccessible to it. True, the acknowledgment of the opposition between the religious sphere and the natural one is not an innovation in the religious language; what is unique about Leibowitz in this context is that he did not look for bridges or connecting points between the two spheres but made great efforts to strengthen exactly the split between them in order to defend the religious belief from invasion of any natural or human elements.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the compartmentalization is not evidence that there are no relationships between the different spheres that were separated. On the contrary, the compartmentalization is actually defining the framework in which the relationships between the different spheres can be elucidated, namely: these are crystallized around the principles of the heteronomy of God's commandments and the idea of absolute transcendence. According to Leibowitz' only complete detachment of the divine from the human can secure the total devotion of the believer to the work of God. In order to illustrate his approach, he suggested distinguishing between two types of religions: granting and demanding. The »granting religion« provides a means to fulfill the believer's needs, whereas the »demanding religion« imposes upon him obligations without promising him anything in return (*Judaism*, 13-14). For Leibowitz, as long as one's faith is based on what religion grants to human beings it should be seen as idolatry (*Judaism*, 64). Therefore, only the »demanding religion« is a genuine religion, and vice versa: only when belief is detached from worldly experience and reality and has no function in one's life is it really belief.

At the present point, the distinction between the two religions encounters another one regarding two beliefs, taken from the Jewish classics, which Leibowitz employed in order to support his concept of Judaism: »belief for its own sake« and »belief not for its own sake.«¹⁷ What distinguishes between these two is the motivation and not the praxis of religious commandments. The »belief not for its own sake« is actually an instrument for fulfilling one's needs, or it appears as a conclusion that one reaches out of his worldly experience. It is clear that this kind of belief is dependent on the believer achieving his goals, without which it would perish. »Belief for its own sake« that lacks any external purpose and does not actually give the believer any kind of benefit or satisfaction is different. According to Leibowitz, only this kind of belief is genuine, precisely because as a believer is not expected to feel »happiness«, »perfection« or »morality« (*Judaism*, 63). For all

16) For a sketch of the typical Jewish responses to modernity, see: Goldmann 1956; Liehmann 1988, 43-59.

17) This classical distinction appeared in many contexts. For instance see: B. T. Ta'ama 7a. Leibowitz wrote a series of articles on the topic of »Lishmah and Not-Lishmah« (for its own sake and not for its own sake). The one which was translated into English appeared in: *Judaism*, 61-78.

these, Leibowitz determined one does not need religious belief; he can get them from even better agents. The only satisfaction that the 'believer' for its own sake, can wish to have is the contentment from fulfilling the divine obligation (*Judaism*, 37-42). However, a genuine belief must be independent even of this satisfaction. Finally, as long as one's belief bears witness to his needs or motivation, this can be considered as evidence of its falseness.

Having said all that, it is not surprising that no harmony, but an experience of crisis and conflict appears as a permanent component in the daily routine of the believer. The frustration that accompanies this experience has many reasons. Firstly, it is due to the existence of an extremely huge gap between the autonomy that is granted to the believer at the constitutive stage of the decision to believe and the unreserved heteronomy to which he must commit himself within the religious experience. In a way, the concept of compartmentalization can be seen as a supreme expression to the understanding of this gap as unbridgeable. Furthermore, the understanding of the religious experience as governed by compartmentalization regulates the moments of crisis. As a result of that, these do not appear as stemming from one's caprice or emotional condition but as a substantial component of the religious belief as such. Secondly, the experience of crisis is a result of the demand to severely split between religious faith and the believer's personal life. So much so, that what is demanded from the believer is relinquishing some of the values that s/he keeps as a natural being. Leibowitz regarded the biblical story of Abraham who was ordered by God to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac and to reject the supreme value of fatherhood, of defending one's child, as a paradigm of the conflict between the human and the divine.¹⁸ Out of the study of this biblical story, Leibowitz concluded the following:

18) The understanding of the binding of Isaac (Akedah) as a paradigm of the religious experience, in which the believer is required to abandon his humanity, has appeared in Jewish and Christian sources. See: Mannoudes 1963, section 3, chap. 24, 497f; Neues Testament, Römer, chap. 4 (»Das Beispiel Abrahams«). Yet, among the Jewish thinkers there is a different approach, according to which Judaism and humanity can meet each other. See: Fromm 1950, 34-55. Fromm suggested also a comparative view to the understanding of God in Judaism and Christianity. Fromm 1989, 57-65. Hartman, who was acquainted with Fromm's thinking, criticized Leibowitz' understanding of the binding of Isaac and suggested an alternative model of »Covenant« to the relations between God and his believers. Hartman 1985, 42-59; Hartman 1999, 11f (Hartman referred also to Leibowitz' concept of Judaism, see: *ibid.* 267-296). In Soloveitchik's thinking these two polar models of Judaism, appeared and explored as two indispensable components of the religious experience. See: Soloveitchik, 'For a comparison between Leibowitz' view of God's commandments and that of Soloveitchik, see: Sagl 1997b. See also: Sokol 1993.

»Sacrifice is a very religious crisis ... in the sacrifice God demanded of Abraham all he had ... relinquishing human and collective values ... all the elements of human consciousness – those concerning the individual and those relating to all human problems – everything was rejected. There is no crisis as big as the one between the reality of the human being, including his material and emotional reality, and the status of man when he stands in front of God« (Faith, 58).¹⁹

Against this background, one can accurately understand the meaning of Leibowitz' objection to the idea of »Jewish morality«, contending that a person who acts as a moral agent cannot be acting as religious agent. In other words, religious action cannot be simultaneously a moral action. Whereas the morality of an action is determined by one's intentions and desires, the religious appropriateness of an act is determined by one's commitment to following God's commandments. In Leibowitz' words:

»Being moral, from the standpoint of a secular ethic, can have only either of two meanings; directing man's will in accordance with man's knowledge of reality ... or directing man's will in accordance with man's recognition of his duty ... the Torah does not recognize moral imperatives stemming from knowledge of natural reality or from awareness of man's duty to his fellow man. All it recognizes are Mitzvot, divine imperative. The Torah and the prophets never appeal to the human conscience, which harbors idolatrous tendencies. No equivalent of term »conscience« appears in the scripture« (Judaism, 18).

»[Therefore] Morality can be neither Jewish nor non-Jewish, neither religious nor t'religious ... [it] is an atheistic category which differs radically from religious consciousness or religious feeling. From standpoint of Judaism man as such has no intrinsic value. He is an »image of gods«, and only as such does he possess special significance. That is why Judaism did not produce an ethical theory of its own, was never embodied in moral system, and made no pretenses of representing a specific moral point of view« (Judaism, 6-7).²⁰

So Leibowitz' idea of faith combines two opposed aspects: the negative one eliminates the »utilitarian justification, whether it be for the good of individuals, of society, or of the nation« (*Judaism*, 19), which usually plays an important role in ethics. The positive aspect refers to the emphasis on the performance of the religious imperatives. That is to say that as a result of the principle of compartmental-

19) For a comprehensive commentary of the biblical story of the binding of Isaac (in Hebrew: Akedah), see: Sagl 1998. See also: Jacobs 1981.

20) The words »is an atheistic category which« were mistakenly omitted from the English translation and have been added above according to the Hebrew source.

zation, the believer does not appear in the religious experience as a complete being but solely as a non-personal performer of the commandments of God.²¹

Yet, the reduction that occurs to the believer's being in Leibowitz' thinking, which actually amounts to a reduction of any human aspect from faith, does not say that s/he is not crucial for the actualization of the compartmentalization itself. Whereas the two above discussed reasons for the believer's experience of crisis – The gap between the believer's initial autonomy and the demand to commit oneself to the Divine commandments; The demand to severely split between religious faith and the believer's personal life – actually originated in Leibowitz' specific understanding of the Jewish faith, a supplementary one refers to the disposition of the believer himself. Leibowitz depicted the believer as:

»One who cannot live in peace with natural reality, even though he himself is part of this reality which he cannot transcend, no matter whether he is a believer or a non-believer, whether he accepts divine authority or not» (Faith, 57).

The reduction is then all about the specific position, which the believer is required to shape, that conditions genuine faith as such.

However, the difference between the ontological split in human beings as such and not necessarily as believers, and the split suggested by Leibowitz, must be marked in order to achieve an accurate understanding of the function of the compartmentalization in this thinking. Actually the split that concerns religious experience, which is suggested by Leibowitz, adds a further and unnecessary section to the more basic one that concerns one's psycho-physical being. Choosing this way, Leibowitz not only made it more difficult to cope with, but also radicalized the initial split. Yet only carrying out an unnecessary split can be of value, for it transcends one's given factuality. Therefore, being part of one's given factuality, the psycho-physical split does not necessarily have religious value, value which is granted to faith precisely because of carrying out a compartmentalization and voluntarily facing the challenges that accompany it. In other words: though the believer is acquainted with the feeling of split, to him such feeling cannot be of help and hence compartmentalization remains as a religious mission to fulfill.

It is precisely Leibowitz' respectful attitude towards human given that prevents him from the attempt to suggest any solution or relief either to the human

wish to transcend the natural reality or to the situation of the split. Instead, he spoke for an adoption of the split itself and for a routine of constant contact with the difficulties and frustrations that result from this very choice. Actually, what is suffering in the disposition of the believer is not only the very fact that it can change nothing in human factuality, but that the religious praxis does not shape his personality from inside and hence cannot really become a habit. The believer will always remain a natural being, whereas religious imperatives are divine. Therefore, no comfort but endless crises and battles appear as the daily lot of the believer. Even though the believer becomes acquainted with these, he is unable to develop better tools to deal with them, for they stem from the very fact of his natural being. He is doomed to find himself daily at the beginning of the path without getting any feeling of experience or achievement from yesterday's battle. Every day he begins from the very same point.

»Performance of the Divine Mitzvot [commandments] is man's path to God, an infinite path, the end of which is never attained and is, in effect, unattainable. A man is bound to know that this path never terminates. One follows it without advancing beyond the point of departure. Recognition that the religious function imposed upon man is finite and never ending is the faith, which finds expression in the regularity, constancy and perseverance in the performance of the Divine Mitzvot [commandments]. The circle of the religious praxis rotates constantly about its center. Every day they will appear to you as new», for after each act the position of man remains as it was before. The aim of proximity to god is unattainable. It is infinitely distant, for God is in heaven and you on the earth» (Eccles. 5:1). What then is the substance and import of performance of the Divine Mitzvot [commandments]? It is man's striving to attain the religious goal» (Judaism, 15-16).

It is clear, then, Leibowitz strives to maintain the dichotomy between the human and the divine; in his thinking, the demand to overcome one's own human nature becomes the core of the religious praxis without promising the believer any payment or compensation for his struggling and suffering. That is to say that the early decision of the believer, the one from which everything started, is never safe and stable. It needs constant care and maintenance. The experience of the believer is a Sisyphean one – all the efforts that the believer puts into obeying the religious imperatives cannot prevent him from conceding to his natural being. Living this way demands the ability to withstand daily frustrations, which appear as a constant component in one's religious experience.

Out of the above discussion of compartmentalization, one can easily figure out the positive aspects of Leibowitz' critique of the idea of religious subjectivity. In such a concept of subjectivity humanity and divinity are integrated, and that overlooks the basic data of human existence, according to which the gap between human

21) For a general discussion of the relationships between religion and morality, see: Sagi / Staman 1995, Harris, for a more specific critique of Leibowitz' position, see: Sagi / Staman 1995, 135-164. For a further perspective into this topic in Judaism, see: Sagi 1996, Sagi 1994.

beings and the divine is unbridgeable. Therefore, the idea of religious subjectivity appears as deceptive and as deceiving; it may cause one to forget or at least overlook the limits within which *s/he* lives. As a result, the concept of religious subjectivity appears as an inauthentic position. Contrary to that is Leibowitz' understanding of believer, which endeavors to keep in mind the absolute transcendence of the divine and at the same time an ideal of adhering to an authentic self-perception. Finally in Leibowitz' idea of faith, one's awareness of the scope of one's life is elevated into a religious value.

The three functions of the splitting strategy discussed above – defining the spheres of human experience, narrowing the scope of religious life and compartmentalization – point clearly to an increasing process of pushing the believer's individuality outside the religious experience. Though by his founding decision the believer appears as an indispensable transcendental condition to the realization of the religious belief, the splitting strategy has finally set the believer aside from the religious experience. As we have seen, at the decision stage that preceded the implementation of the splitting, the believer enjoyed the status of an establisher of the religious experience, so that without him such experience could not come into being. This was the crucial infrastructure to the reality of religious life. However, afterwards, the believer was removed from the religious life, in two senses: first he did not serve as a resource to its becoming more intelligible. Second, the believer himself did not become more comprehensible in the light of his decision. It transpires, then, that we are dealing here with a double bind. The believer as an individual does not bear witness to religious belief, and the belief itself cannot provide evidence about the believer.

Yet, the dismissal of the believer from the religious experience was an unavoidable consequence of the splitting strategy. This dismissal is actually revealed as a necessary condition for the bestowal of a transcendental and divine meaning to religious life. Therefore, the individuality of the believer has become irrelevant to such a meaning of religious life. The self of the believer does not blend into the religious experience, but keeps its own identity. One can see the selfhood of the believer also as transcendental, but this is a different kind of transcendentalism from the one that can be attributed to God – whereas that of the believer is an immanent, that of God is a transcendent. Nonetheless, God's transcendentalism is accessible by his commandments, but that of the believer remains closed. Finally, the figure of the believer is elucidated neither in the immanent sphere – for his very decision to become believer transcends the borders of immanence – nor in the transcendent sphere – for the individuality of the believer finds no expression in the religious praxis. As a result, the believer in Leibowitz' thinking remains an enigma, as long as one tries to access him from the viewpoint of the sphere of religious experience. Yet, the believer can still be open to rational reflection. That is to

say, the believer is not deprived of the possibility of achieving self-understanding. All that Leibowitz says is that such an understanding has no religious meaning or value and hence cannot have any impact on religious experience. That means that the split is not only between the natural sphere and the religious one, but also in the very being of the believer who functions in two different unbridgeable contexts. The radicalism that characterizes Leibowitz' thinking is remarkable considering the fact that even the believer, who is the establisher of the religious experience, cannot bridge between the natural experience and the religious one, for the believer himself is eliminated from it together with every natural component of the human life.

The believer as a practitioner can be depicted then as an atomistic being, detached from any realistic context, closed from himself as well as from the external world. *S/he* functions in the religious praxis, deprived of any particularity and individuality. Being purified of any essential components, the believer cannot become an object for investigation. In other words, the believer must appear in the religious experience in order to bring it to reality; he is the subject who establishes the religious experience; yet he appears as an abstraction from the reality in which he functions and represents an extreme simplicity and an undivided unity. The fact that this unity is an ideal one and does not involve any individual elements enables the believer to treat the different commandments of religion equally. In fact, there is no reason why he should not treat them this way, since, according to Leibowitz, the different religious imperatives are contrasted in equal measure to his natural and individual being precisely because they are God-given. This contrast and the elimination of all individual elements are exactly what guarantee the unity of the religious experience and defend it from subjectivization and particularization. Therefore, one should be reserved about describing the believer unilaterally, for *s/he* is supposed to appear just the same throughout his praxis; his/*her* ideal being is exactly the reason why it is possible to reach an adequate understanding of him. The separation between the praxis and the believers' individuality transpires then, as extremely crucial for Leibowitz' thinking, for it maintains the deep contrast between the religious experience and the natural one. Of course, the believer does not cease to be an immanent being, but he functions, or is expected to function, as an ideal being detached from any individuality. Only as such can *s/he* not damage the transcendental character of the religious experience.

Only at the present point, we may understand Leibowitz' contention, according to which the essence of religious belief is not one of cognition but one of endeavor. In other words, religious belief is not linked with the attempt to achieve certain knowledge about religion or faith, but with the effort to execute the practical implementations of it (*Judaism*, 15). This does not necessarily mean that the believer does not understand what he practices, but only that his/*her* faith is independent of such understanding. Finally, the believer's disposition locates him at a

middle point – *s/he* functions as a non-empiric and as an ideal being in the religious experience, but at the same time *s/he* is separated from the idealistic frame of consciousness for he is not required or expected to achieve understanding concerning religious faith but to practice the religious imperatives. This is the way *she / he* is supposed to stand, or better, obliged to face religious commandments: cleared of one's own individuality but thanks to the early establishing decision *s/he* does not cease to be an individual. In other words, religious experience does not destroy one's individuality but rather eliminates it.

However, the proposed understanding of the location of the believer may only regulate the gap between the two stages – the empirical stage of the initial decision and the abstract one of religious praxis – but not solve the fundamental paradox of subjectivity in Leibowitz' thinking.²² This paradox has two dimensions: firstly, the believer, as the one who takes that decision, is transcendental to any rational explanation and reasoning. Yet, once he puts himself into the religious experience *s/he* is expected to transcend his empiric being and to function as an ideal being. Consequently, one's original individuality leaves no impact on his/her religious experience. Secondly, the believer in Leibowitz' thinking is deflected from the initial status of an establisher and transferred to that of compliance, so much so that his individuality is eliminated from the religious experience.

Clearly, Leibowitz by no means understood the above-depicted changes, which occur to the believer, as reflecting loss of freedom. On contrary, for him »None but he who busies himself with the Scripture (Torah) is free« – he is free from the bondage of nature because he lives a life which is contrary to nature« (*Judaism*, 22). In other words, as long as we are natural beings, we cannot claim the status of establishers, for we are subjected to forces over which we have no control. Only when we take a decision that we are not compelled to take – and the decision to believe is of this kind – can we justly enjoy the status of establishers and hence be really free beings. Leibowitz reversed, then, in a Spinozistic way, the ordinary thinking according to which freedom means not to be subordinated to external factors. According to him, as natural beings we are subordinated anyway, but we can have a touch of freedom once we subordinate ourselves to something that as modern beings we can avoid: the religious praxis. However, only in the sphere we entered by our decision to believe we are free beings, but out of that sphere we helplessly remain subordinate beings due to our human nature. Freedom is therefore accepting limitations that one can avoid.

Finally, the believer appears as one who has his own personal way of being, so one can never really know what happens in his heart. It is impossible to understand

22) For a phenomenological perspective, that underlies my discussion, see: Sokolowski 2000, 112-129; Carr 1999, 67-97.

him, or to be more precise, the specific will to accept God's commandments and hence to become a believer appears as such. Actually, this will is the only context in which Leibowitz' theory of subjectivity is confirmed, for only there can one find accordance between the I and his activity – accordance which ceases to appear in the sphere of practical deeds or in the cognitive sphere where the individual can separate himself from what he does or what he thinks.

D. Defense of the possibility of religious subjectivity

Leibowitz' defense of religion from subjectivization and particularization, as we have seen previously, rested upon an extreme individualistic idea of subjectivity. In the light of the requested goals, the implemented splitting strategy is undoubtedly revealed as a useful means. However, the immanent perspective that I employed up to the present point cannot stand by itself but needs supplementary support of a different kind. In the present section I shall argue that the believer still has an indispensable role in the religious experience and therefore *s/he* should not be eliminated from it. Moreover, the suggested criticism will strive to show that without the complete presence of the believer, Leibowitz' idea of faith makes no sense. In order to achieve that one must go back to the very basic assumptions of Leibowitz, not necessarily in order to refute them but to point to their problematic nature.

The first assumption to be scrutinized is the one that regards the status of the believer in religious praxis. As we have seen before, Leibowitz treated the involvement of the believer's life and personality as a threat to the sacredness of the religious experience. The wish to protect the religious experience from subjectivization and naturalization led Leibowitz to eliminate the believer from it. As a result of the implementation of the splitting strategy, not only are the empirical factors that concern the believer's life doomed to be excluded from the religious experience, but also his personal consciousness. It is exactly the exclusion of one's consciousness, which finally led to the identification of the religious experience with its praxis. It seems then that in the context of his discussion of faith, Leibowitz treated one's consciousness essentially as an expression of his/her individuality or even as identified with it, but not as also having general aspects. Certainly, lacking the factor of consciousness one cannot even regard religious praxis as experience. However, whether this view of consciousness can be justified or not, it cannot enable us to determine the identity of the practitioner, namely the one who says, »I follow God's commandments«.

Nonetheless, my contention is that the believer as a whole being is needed not only for taking the initial decision and hence as a constitutive subject for faith, he

is necessary precisely for the specific shape that Leibowitz wished to grant the religious praxis. As said above, what differentiates between 'belief for its own sake' and 'belief not for its own sake' is the intention behind them and not the praxis of religious imperatives, which in any case is carried out according to identical criteria. Exactly in regard to this fact, the following questions emerge: does one's intention not come from his/her consciousness and therefore represent the presence of it at the same time? Why assume that every meaning inevitably makes the intended object subjective? Cannot personal consciousness be influential in other ways than subjectivizing and naturalizing? I contend that the »I« is crucial not only as the performer of the divine commandments, but also as a person of consciousness that can bestow a religious meaning upon praxis. Therefore, especially in regard to Leibowitz' idea of unconditional religious praxis, the elimination of the individuality of the believer and the reduction of his/her being to a practitioner is problematic.

The second assumption refers to God's mode of presence before the religious experience, which was grasped by Leibowitz as absolutely transcendent. Leibowitz stated that not only does God's being leave no traces in the world, and not even as indirectly referring to human beings; actually the path the believer is about to take, or better, is obliged to face religious imperatives must be independent of the immanent reality in which religious praxis takes place. In his words: »the position in front of god is not mirrored in the objective reality; it is above that reality and beyond it« (*Faith*, 59). This aspect may either indirectly explain the logic behind the depriving consciousness of any role in the religious praxis itself, or complete it. Simply, God is transcendent – to human consciousness and to the world. Therefore the attempt to understand him or the way he relates to the world is in vain. However, it seems to me that the more profound idea that supported these two theses – concerning God and the believer – is Leibowitz' wish to support independent relationships between immanence and Transcendence; namely between the worldly reality, including that of human beings, and God's entity; God's independence of his believers and of the immanent reality rests on the very fact of his absolute transcendence: »God's divinity is entirely intrinsic to Him and does not consist in his relation to the world, whose contingent existence adds nothing to God's divinity... Clearly, his kingship is essential to Him, God is a king even in the absence of a world in which He reigns« (*Judaism*, 74). God's transcendence embodies, then, not only his/her entity but also the meaning of it for the religious praxis.

Yet, what is problematic in the exposed moves above is not necessarily Leibowitz' assumptions but the conclusions he deduced from them. In the first place, an independent relationship does not rule out, at least not by definition, the very possibility of having an affinity – both from God's side and from that of the believer. Namely, one can have contact with something and remain independent of it.

Presumably, Leibowitz' radical way of thinking could not enable him to discern the possibility of gradation. Therefore, for him any kind of touch or contact ends up, sooner or later, in total absorption. Moreover, in my opinion this logical deficiency is not the main problem in Leibowitz' present concept, but the fact that the ideal of total transcendence unavoidably excludes God from the religious experience as a whole. Consequently, God »appears« in the religious praxis in an analogical mode, namely by following his commandments, but his very entity, i. e., exactly the core of his meaning according to Leibowitz, is absent there. Leibowitz himself admitted that, saying that »in reflecting and speaking about man's standing before God, the believer tries to refer minimally to God, who has no image at all and makes effort to direct his religious consciousness to himself as recognizing his duty to his God« (*Judaism*, 76).

The question is, then, if God's presence is vanishing within the religious praxis and metaphysics is not acknowledged as a legitimate means to give expression to God's entity or to the way he relates to his believers, what meaning can one bestow upon God? Does not Leibowitz' unreserved emphasis on God's transcendence, as a being as well as an object of consciousness, finally leave unanswered the question why at all believe? Leibowitz would have replied, because I want to. Yet, in his thinking, Leibowitz supplies no means to maintain that will or to defend it from its opposition. In other words, my contention is that an extreme conception of absolute transcendence damages the very possibility of constituting a real relationship to the God as the subject of religion. Mere acknowledgment of God's transcendent being, which does not receive constant confirmation in the believer's consciousness and within his praxis, cannot support the religious praxis as directed to God. The vanishing of God and that of the believer, adds up to a meaningless religious praxis for it has neither subject nor object.

A possible explanation of the double elimination that occurs in Leibowitz' idea of faith can be that he preferred giving expression to God's being over the meaning of it to the believer, or else that he preferred ontology to epistemology. Yet one wonders why assume the need to choose between the two? Moreover, what sense can ontology have when it is not accompanied with an epistemology or at least with a rational account of the being to which that ontology refers? In other words, an ontology, which does not include within itself the means to validate the being to which it strives to represent, remains denuded and may end up as a groundless idea. Therefore, in order to give support to his ontology, i. e., his concept of God as absolutely transcendent, Leibowitz should have suggested means to understand it. Such an understanding does not have to be complete or rooted in coherent epistemology. Yet, it is a crucial supplement to his thinking, for it may face the obvious human need to understand. In my opinion, such understanding not only cannot damage the specific idea of Leibowitz' faith, but may support the very possibility of it.

E. Summary

Leibowitz' attempt to establish religious faith solely on praxis rejected the widespread traditional approaches that usually regard metaphysics as a theoretical justification or as a mental infrastructure to the religious praxis. Instead, he contends that there is no such difference between belief and religion, for »belief' is but the religion of divine commandments, outside of which the religious belief does not exist at all« (*Judaism*, 38). It means, then, that all we know about the believer is a depiction of the religious imperatives that rule his life; namely, nothing about his individuality and subjectivity from which stemmed his initial decision to believe. Consequently, one's decision to believe and his/her entire individual world are excluded from the realm of religion. That is to say that believers remain individuals and the differences between them and non-believers are narrowed to the sphere of praxis. This is the core around which was consolidated the tolerant vision of Leibowitz that was devoted both to the individuality of religious practitioners and to the freedom of one's everyday life to be conducted by its immanent forces.

Yet, the suggested commentary to Leibowitz' idea of faith, aimed to point also to its deficiencies. I contended that Leibowitz' endeavor to clear the religious experience from subjective elements, individual as well as mental, transpired as impossible to fulfill. Moreover, exactly his idea of religious faith was revealed as dependent upon the subjectivity of the believer – not only for the performance of the religious praxis itself but also in order to have the right intentions within the act itself. As a matter of a fact, without the presence of the believer as an agent of thinking and truth, God himself would be dismissed from religious praxis. Needless to say, an idea of religious faith devoid of believers and of God is meaningless.

Seeking a total independence of religious praxis, Leibowitz failed to differentiate between different kinds of conditionality. Whereas the conditionality that refers to factual reality is contingent by its very nature, the conditionality that relates to the believer's individuality is crucial to faith itself to the extent that without it – no faith or praxis can exist at all. Hence, it is precisely the demand to achieve total independence of transcendence from immanence, which was addressed to the believer as a conscious being, that made Leibowitz' idea of faith as impossible to implement. However, anchoring a religious conception in immanence does not necessarily entail relinquishing the idea of transcendence or the experience of God's presence. On the contrary, especially a conception that assumes that God is absolutely transcendent to religious experience, should facilitate and even demand the involvement of an immanent consciousness that will speak for the being of God, and thus confirm its presence in the religious experience. Admitting the essentiality of the believer's subjectivity to the praxis by no means says that faith must be a subjective matter. Yet the fact that religious faith cannot but be realized

as a human experience, indicates that subjective beings are necessarily involved in it. Therefore, in my opinion, the presence of believers as subjects in religious experience should be defended.

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