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**Religion and Solidarity
The Vicissitudes of Protestantism**

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Abstract (147 words)

This chapter addresses the relationship between religion and solidarity, conceiving the latter in the classical Durkheimian sense of a shared understanding of belonging to a group or community. Because Durkheim and Weber both singled it out for special theoretical attention, we focus on the case of Protestantism. We use interview data to study whether and how the contrasting understandings of the sacred that set orthodox and liberal Protestantism apart from each other give rise to different understandings of group solidarity. We find that the orthodox Protestant notion of a radically transcendent personal God stands in the way of anything but narrowly defined, vulnerable and precarious congregations. The liberal Protestant understanding of the sacred as an omnipresent and impersonal divine spirit, on the other hand, informs diverse, inclusive, and network-like communities without strict boundaries. Implications for the classical cultural sociologies of religion of Durkheim and Weber are discussed.

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1. Introduction

They are different from other Dutch people. (...) Watching television is forbidden (...) they dress decently and dully (...). They have their own newspaper, their own schools, their own political party. In short, it is a closely-knit community, and their church services are overcrowded instead of depopulated.

(Voiceover television documentary *Toen was geloof nog heel gewoon: De Biblebelt* [Back then, faith was still very normal: The Biblebelt], NPO, August 26, 2017).

Whereas the classical sociologies of Durkheim and Weber treated culture and religion as inextricably intertwined, this tendency dissolved soon after the classical period. Vested religious interests colonized sociology of religion to re-focus it on practical concerns pertaining to religious authority, like church attendance and allegiance to official church doctrine (Luckmann 1967, Wilson 1982). And while the sociological study of culture started booming from the 1970s onwards, much of it quickly shifted its focus to the role of culture in creating, sustaining and transmitting power and privilege (consider Frankfurt school critical theory, Bourdieusian sociology of culture, and most of postmodern sociology) (see for critiques of this tendency: Alexander and Smith 2003; Houtman and Achterberg 2016). Since the classical period, sociology of culture and sociology of religion have in effect become separate fields that have both increasingly marginalized the study of meaning *per se*.

Yet characterizations of orthodox Protestants like the one cited above call for a return to Durkheim's and Weber's classical cultural sociologies of religion. Not simply because those concerned are the heirs of Max Weber's orthodox Protestants who back in the sixteenth century furthered western modernity (1978 [1904-1905]), but especially because more than a century ago Emile Durkheim in his study *Suicide* (1951 [1897]) claimed precisely the

opposite, i.e., that Protestantism does not boast the cohesive and solidary religious communities identified by the documentary's voiceover. More than this, the voiceover echoes a marked tendency in contemporary sociology of religion to define 'strong' religion in terms of "the ability of a movement or organization to maintain social control, group cohesion, and membership retention by sustaining the intensity of its members' commitment to and readiness to sacrifice for the group" (Smith 1998, p. 20-21). This understanding also accounts for the almost routine reduction of religion to 'church membership' or (even more typical) 'church attendance' in contemporary sociology of religion. This tendency completely defines away the religious worldviews that were so central to classical sociological understandings of religion (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2004, Voas and Doebler 2011). Needless to say, the other side of this same coin are the similarly routine portrayals of contemporary post-Christian spirituality as 'too individualized' to qualify as 'real' religion, because it dismisses religious institutions and organizations as insignificant side issues (see for critiques of this tendency: Aupers and Houtman 2006, Houtman and Tromp forthcoming, Lynch 2007, p. 40-70, Woodhead 2010).

In what follows, we therefore discuss how differences in religious worldviews, more specifically conceptions of the sacred and of religious authority, inform differences in solidarity, conceived in the classical Durkheimian sense of a shared understanding of belonging to a group or community. We do so by comparing orthodox and liberal Protestants on the basis of qualitative interview data collected by the second author. Before we do so, we discuss Durkheim's and Weber's classical accounts of religion and Protestantism. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for Durkheim's analysis of religion and community, and for sociology of religion generally.

2. The Classical Accounts of Durkheim and Weber

2.1. Durkheim on Religion and Protestantism

There are basically two different Durkheims. The first is the early, positivist Durkheim, as foregrounded by later generations of sociologists: the Durkheim that is discussed in introductory textbooks in sociology, i.e., the Durkheim of the division of labour (1964 [1893]), of the rules of sociological method (1964 [1895]) and of suicide rates (1951 [1897]). The second Durkheim is the cultural-sociological and anthropological one of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]) and *Primitive Classification* (Durkheim and Mauss 1963 [1903]). Even though this second Durkheim is not completely neglected in introductory sociology texts, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]) is certainly not discussed as frequent

as the early Durkheim and his book with Mauss is typically neglected altogether. The sociological Durkheim is in practice hence very much the early Durkheim, while the intellectual significance of the late one lies more in sociology of religion and cultural anthropology than in general sociology. Even though the two do surely overlap in key respects (e.g., in postulating that the social precedes and shapes the individual), they differ profoundly in their treatment of culture, meaning, and religion.

In *The Division of Labor in Society* (1964 [1893]) the early Durkheim influentially critiqued Auguste Comte's notion that in modern industrial societies, too, solidarity can be based on religion and shared moral norms and values (Gouldner 1958). Rather than on these cultural similarities between people ('mechanical solidarity'), he argued, solidarity could in these societies only be based on differences pertaining to occupational activities, embodied by the division of labour ('organic solidarity'). Yet, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]) the late Durkheim came very close to the Comtean position that he had initially dismissed. For here he conceived of religion as a major source of solidarity and cohesion in and of itself in any type of society, 'primitive' and modern alike. He here defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (1995 [1912], p. 44). During the course of Durkheim's career, then, he transformed religion from a relic of the past that could not sustain the modern order into a quintessential source of cohesion and solidarity in modern societies.

This gives rise to an intriguing paradox in Durkheim's treatment of Protestantism. For in *Suicide* the early Durkheim argued that religions differ in their solidarity-providing potential, and in effect in their capacity to protect individuals against meaninglessness and suicide. Catholic countries and areas, he demonstrated by means of suicide statistics, do a markedly better job in this than Protestant ones. And indeed, patterns for the UK with its nominally Protestant, yet markedly Catholic-style Anglican Church resemble the patterns found for Catholic rather than Protestant continental European countries. In *Suicide* Durkheim hence treated Protestantism as the 'other' of Catholicism, i.e., as a religious tradition that epitomizes the typically modern dissolution of pre-given cultural orders that can sustain cohesion and solidarity. This raises the question of whether and how this early characterization of Protestantism can be reconciled with Durkheim's later notion that religion by definitional fiat provides solidarity. What appears to be needed is a more fine-tuned and open-ended analysis that allows different religious worldviews to have different implications for group solidarity. We single out Protestantism for such an analysis, because it clearly constitutes a critical case.

2.2. Weber on Protestantism and Modernity

Weber's comparative analysis of the world religions singles out orthodox Protestantism for special attention for different reasons. He foregrounds the combination of asceticism and inner-worldliness that provides it with unprecedented world-transforming potential and historical significance (Weber 1963 [1922], 1978 [1904-1905]). This is because asceticism incites believers to act as active tools of God rather than as passive vessels of the sacred (as in mysticism), while central to inner-worldliness is the notion that one does not need to forsake one's worldly calling (e.g., by leading a monastic life) to attain the status of a religious *virtuoso*. The Protestant combination of asceticism and inner-worldliness, Weber asserted, played a major role in bringing about the modern rationalized order of the West. Indeed, Weber's comparative analysis of the world religions aims to demonstrate how non-western religions like Hinduism, Confucianism and Buddhism that were either mystical, or other-worldly, or both, did not have such world-transforming consequences.

Protestantism's role in the breakthrough to modernity entails more than providing fertile ground for the rise of modern capitalism, as discussed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1978 [1904-1905]). Initially a reform movement within the Catholic church, Protestantism revolted against the veneration of saints and relics; against all sorts of magical practices; and against the notion that church elites had privileged access to the sacred and even embodied the sacred themselves. More generally conceived, then, the Reformation dismissed the belief that the divine could be found in the world itself and aimed to weed out belief in the presence of all sorts of supernatural spirits, forces and powers by radicalizing the separation between the world and the divine.

This separation had long before been introduced by anti-magical ancient Judaism, but had subsequently been relativized by Catholicism, that for many long centuries provided ample room for magic, myth and mystery. For Weber, the Reformation in effect constituted a decisive step in a long-term process of disenchantment: "That great historic process in the development of religion, the elimination of magic from the world which had begun with the old Hebrew prophets and (...) had repudiated all magical means to salvation as superstition and sin, came here to its logical conclusion" (Weber 1978 [1904-1905], p. 105). By making God more radically transcendent than he had ever been before, the Protestant Reformation denied that the sacred could be found in the world itself, transforming the latter into a meaningless and soulless 'thing', void of sacrality and meaning. This disenchantment opened up the world for unscrupulous scientific analysis and technological intervention (Weber 1948 [1919]). Peter Berger (1967, p. 112) accurately summarizes Weber's position

when he concludes that “Protestantism served as a historically decisive prelude to secularization, whatever may have been the importance of other factors”, adding that “A sky empty of angels becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer and, eventually, of the astronaut” (1967, p. 112-113).

3. Religious Dualism and the Vicissitudes of Protestantism

3.1. Religious Dualism and Disenchantment

Ernst Troeltsch, the German theologian with marked sociological research interests, was one of Weber’s best friends and intellectual sparring partners, even to the extent that “(...) his [Troeltsch’s] most significant empirical sociological investigation *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (...) may be considered a supplement to the works of Max Weber” (Mannheim cited in Graf 2014, p. 325). Following the terminology that Troeltsch (1992 [1912]) introduced in the aforementioned book, the orthodox strain of Protestantism foregrounded by Weber epitomizes ‘sect’ religion as distinguishable from ‘church’ religion, a distinction recently echoed by Linda Woodhead’s (2004) between ‘biblical’ Christianity respectively ‘church’ Christianity. The latter posits the existence of just one church that envelops all members of a community and understands itself as intimately bound up with the latter. Becoming a church member is here hence not a deliberate personal act: one is ‘born into’ a community and its church and in principle stays a member until one’s final day. This model of religion features a priesthood that mediates between God and the community of believers and that in effect has privileged access to the sacred. Due to this, the church model of religion assumes religious hierarchy: the priesthood is understood as more or less sacred in and of itself and hence as less worldly and profane than rank-and-file church members. The Roman Catholic church comes closest to this model of religion and it is clear that the same goes for Durkheim’s notion of religion as entailing “one single community called a Church” (1995 [1912], p. 44).

The Protestant Reformation revolted against all this by underscoring the authority of God, and God alone, while firmly rejecting the notion that the sacred could be found in the world and could be magically manipulated. Protestantism thus boasts a radical distinction between an all-powerful God who has revealed the truth, so that his word as contained in the holy bible constitutes the only valid source of religious authority. Protestants in effect cannot rely on church authority in telling them how to live, but have the bible as their only guideline. This ‘sect’ model of religion in effect features a critical rejection of society’s status quo, because measured against God’s strict commandments the world as it is inevitably falls short. So here

religion is not about being a loyal member of a church and a community, but about obeying God – being a pious believer according to His commandments rather than those of the church. It is precisely this individual responsibility in the quest for religious truth that Durkheim holds responsible for high Protestant suicide rates.

Dualism-induced and doubt-driven quests for religious certainty do also make Protestantism more prone to apostasy than Catholicism. This is because this religious individualism robs it of the ‘plausibility structures’ that help Catholics sustain their faith (Berger 1967). Due to the absence of any legitimate religious authority apart from God himself, and due to the implied status of like-minded fellow believers as potentially misguided, Protestants are thrown back upon themselves in figuring out what God, or rather the bible conceived as His Word, ‘really’ or ‘actually’ demands from them. Even a quick glance at the religious map of Europe reveals the consequences. The most secularized parts of Europe are after all the ones that were historically Protestant, like the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. In historically Catholic Southern Europe, on the other hand, religion has much more successfully withstood the dissolution of religious belief (e.g., Ribberink et al. 2018). A recent article about decline of religion and religious change in the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada nicely illustrates Protestantism’s greater susceptibility to doctrinariness and apostasy alike. While the number of Protestants has declined more sharply than the number of Catholics, practices of church attendance and praying have increased among Protestants and declined among Catholics (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016). What Grace Davie (1994) calls ‘believing without belonging’ is in effect more of a Catholic than a Protestant tendency.

3.2. Vicissitudes of Protestantism

The dualism-induced, doubt-driven quests for religious certainty do not only make Protestantism more prone to apostasy than Catholicism, but also to dissent, fragmentation and schism. A telling example is the so-called ‘Geelkerken affair’ that shook Dutch Protestantism in the 1920s. Dr. Johannes G. Geelkerken, Calvinist theologian and minister had publicly critiqued the notion that the biblical narrative of the snake talking to Eve in paradise (Genesis 3) could be interpreted literally. His stance caused a major conflict in the Protestant church that eventually resulted in an extraordinary General Synod (Assen, May 1926) that deposed Geelkerken from his ministry and created the next schism in Dutch Protestantism. The role of the sole authority of God’s word as revealed by the bible in fuelling religious dissent and fragmentation has abundantly affected the Dutch religious landscape, too. The Protestant fishing village of Urk at the IJsselmeer, for instance, boasts no less than about twenty different Protestant churches, even though it has only about 20,000 inhabitants. Orthodox Protestant

religious dualism thus harmed its own unity and viability by eroding firm plausibility structures and sparking disagreements and fissures.

Particularly objections to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination have from the outset proven divisive. According to this doctrine a transcendent and sovereign God who cannot be magically coerced elects a select few for eternal salvation, so that individual believers cannot influence their own access to the afterlife, no matter how pious and devout they are. The doctrine stands alone with the Hindu doctrine of karma in offering the most logical and flawless solution to the problem of theodicy (i.e., why bad things happen to good people), Weber asserted. Despite this logical unassailability, or rather precisely because of it, Weber's scattered observations about 'brotherly love' or 'brotherliness' (i.e., religiously informed concerns with human suffering) leave no doubt that it eats away at solidarity and empathy with those who suffer (see Symonds and Pudsey 2006, for an extensive discussion). More than that, the doctrine's cruelty made it ethically and emotionally hard to bear, which is why it came under siege from within Protestantism itself as early as the sixteenth century.

Dutch theologian Jakob Harmenszoon (1560–1609, better known under his Latinized name Jacobus Arminius) and his Remonstrant followers critiqued the doctrine for its sheer neglect of personal compassion and moral goodness in the process of attaining religious salvation. This Arminianism profoundly influenced the further development of Protestantism, especially through sixteenth-century Baptism and eighteenth-century Methodism. It stimulated a shift within Protestantism toward a "softer, more human image of the divine" and a "promise of universal redemption": a shift from the "utterly transcendent, awesome and vengeful god" of Calvinism to "a loving father", and a concomitant shift from the salvation of just a small God-chosen elite to the notion that "all those who believe in Christ shall be saved" (Campbell 2007, p. 255).

An even further shift away from Calvinist orthodoxy took place during the period of rapid secularization of the 1960s and 1970s. Back then, Protestant theologians like John Robinson, Paul Tillich, Thomas Altizer, and Rudolf Bultmann tried to save Christianity from loss of legitimacy and plausibility by pushing the limits of liberal Protestantism even further. This took shape as what has come to be known as the 'demythologization movement' in Western Europe and the 'death of God movement' in the USA. These movements sparked a theological shift towards an understanding of the bible as not so much historically and literally 'true', but rather as a collection of myths that can help individuals understand themselves and their lives. Related to this, the notion of belief in a transcendent personal God was abandoned in favour of that of the personal experience of an immanently present spirit or life force (Campbell 2007, Daiber 2002, Streib and Hood 2011), a liberalization of religion that fitted the spirit of the 1960s

and 1970s quite well (Houtman 2008, Houtman et al. 2011, p. 1-24, Musgrove 1974). Needless to say, this substitution of a radically transcendent God that needs to be believed in and obeyed by personal feelings and intuitions, understood as emanations of an immanently present spirit or life force, has always been hard to swallow in orthodox Protestant circles.

4. Orthodox and Liberal Protestants: Samples and Data

4.1. Interview Data

In what follows we compare orthodox and liberal Protestants, focusing on how their respective conceptions of the sacred and of religious authority give rise to different understandings of group solidarity. We base ourselves on 20 in-depth interviews with 11 orthodox and 9 liberal Dutch Protestants, conducted by the second author as part of her PhD project about changes in (non)religious identities across the life course. The interviews lasted three to six hours and pseudonyms are used in the quotations below for privacy reasons. The respondents have been selected by means of snowball sampling, making use of pre-existing networks in the Dutch Biblebelt (orthodox Protestants) and in ecumenical and progressive Protestant congregations (liberal Protestants). Even though articulations of solidarity were not the principal subject of the interviews, and even though ethnography would in fact be preferable to interviews, the data proved sufficiently rich to enable the analysis presented in what follows.

4.2. Orthodox Protestants about God and Religious Authority

In keeping with the foregoing we define orthodox Protestants in terms of their religious dualism and in effect as understanding religious authority as residing with God, and God alone. So those concerned distinguish firmly between the divine realm and the human one, conceiving of God as a radically transcendent person-like entity: “a powerful Being” (Hans), “Somebody – with a capital ‘S’” (Theo), who is “much higher than humans like us” (Renske) and “exalted in heaven, while I am here” (Rianne). They understand this God as omniscient and powerful, as someone “who is everywhere, who sees everything, who knows everything (...) somebody who is surely watching what you are doing” (Theo). He is also perceived to actively interfere on earth as the “maintainer of all things” (Leo) and as the “King of kings” (Rianne), “who has the absolute power and rules our lives” (Roos).

Those concerned see God as possessing absolute power and as embodying “the Truth” (Rhodé), “the solid foundation that does not change” (Rianne). Central to God-ordained truth is a set of ethical rules, generally

referred to as “God’s will” or “God’s commandments”, that impose all sorts of restrictions. Renske vividly remembers her upbringing: “What was, and what was not allowed was clear-cut; theatre, popular music: Forbidden! Evil! Without discussion”. Similarly, Hans, who loves football and cinema, abruptly stopped these activities when he started to take his religious belief seriously. “Horrible!”, he now thinks, “I sinned against God”. Obeying God-given rules is understood as crucial, since God is seen as the ultimate judge “who has punishing qualities” (Jasper) and whose final judgement will inevitably take place, “be it at the end of the world or when one dies” (Roos). While human beings need “to serve and love God”, to quote an often-used expression, they are simultaneously conceived as humble, impure and sinful by nature, as “inclined by nature to hate God and other people”, as Renske and Rianne state in exactly identical words. This makes obeying God’s commandments so immensely difficult that humans are in effect at God’s mercy: “*He* chooses who are the ones [who receive grace]” (Roos, emphasis added). Such divine decisions are understood as completely “sovereign”, which creates a deeply felt “dependency on him, (...) [because] a human being cannot add anything at all” (Hans).

In line with these dualist understandings our orthodox respondents do not assign much authority to religious leaders. When Sietske was asked about this, she laughingly responded, “I just handle that alone”. Renske similarly emphasizes personal responsibility when arguing that “all of us have our own way with the Lord. To be left alone is the most important, which means that I do not interfere with you”. Religious authority is solely attributed to God and his word as contained in the bible: “The bible is my directive, because I believe that it is the divine revelation of God to man. Not even a minister is a directive for me” (Theo). “I absolutely do not want to adopt beliefs that are incompatible with the Bible, since I am convinced that the bible contains the truth”, Rianne aptly summarizes the attitude of the orthodox Protestant respondents. Hence, in trying to serve God and live up to His commandments our respondents scrupulously “seek for purity” (Sietske), “black and white” clarity (Hans), and “clear-cut and unambiguous answers” (Leo).

4.3. Liberal Protestants about God and Religious Authority

In marked contrast to the foregoing, our liberal Protestant respondents do not conceive of God as a transcendent person-like entity, but rather as an impersonal ‘something’: “God is not (...) a somebody” (Nienke). Instead, Nienke defines the divine as “a sort of goodness and beauty (...), a source that consists of energy (...), a source of love”. The liberal Protestants talk about an omnipresent impersonal divine spirit that immanently emerges “bottom up”, to use the words of Niels. They hold “a glimmer of the divine” (Nienke) to reside within every single person in the sense that “everybody

possesses a piece and these [pieces] are together God” (Nadia). This means that God is understood as a “mystery” that “cannot be fixed into one single image” (Milan): “As soon as you start to speak about God, it goes wrong; for it is the God beyond gods who actually transcends all godly images” (Marius).

This immanent and impersonal image of God informs an understanding of religious authority that differs profoundly from that of the orthodox Protestants discussed above. Like the latter they appreciate the bible, yet do not consider it “a law book” but rather a major source of inspiration, “a starting point for an explorative conversation” (Trijntje). Niels defines religious books more generally as “human writings” and incites believers to “stay responsible yourself!”. Trijntje similarly points out the need to “really find [it] within yourself”, while Nadia underscores the significance of self-meditation in “get[ting] rid of one’s ego and go[ing] back to the nature of one’s spirit”. In doing so she counterposes a state of “judgementlessness” [Dutch: oordeelloosheid] against “the ego (...), [i.e.] norms and values”. Lara similarly feels embarrassed “when something is imposed” or “if someone wants to indoctrinate you”. These liberal Protestant respondents, in short, “cannot accord with too much morality, i.e., everything going in the direction of ‘homosexuals are dirty’ or ‘you’re not allowed to do this on Sunday’” (Niels). The divine spark held to reside within every single person is understood as in need of protection against pollution by religious doctrines and institutions.

This notion that the divine cannot be meaningfully captured by doctrines or institutions gives rise to the renowned notion of spiritual ‘seekership’. This notion denies the existence of one ultimate, superior source of religious authority and instead emphasizes the need to remain open to different sources and religious traditions. ‘Seeking’ hence entails “absorbing information [and] just having an open mind on everything” (Trijntje). This comes down to acceptance of the spiritual doctrine of ‘perennialism’, according to which all religious traditions ultimately worship the same divine source (Aupers and Houtman 2006): “You can find wisdom, irrespective of the source, irrespective of traditions (...). So, whether it is Hinduist, Buddhist, or from Egypt: you can be inspired by all of them” (Niels).

5. Solidarity in Orthodox and Liberal Protestantism

We now turn to the question of how these contrasting understandings of the sacred and of religious authority inform different understandings of group solidarity.

5.1. Orthodox-Protestant Solidarity: A Tight, yet Precarious Community

Our orthodox respondents visit the church services of their respective communities at least twice a week, marry like-minded partners, and send their children to orthodox Protestant schools. “It is important to have unity [of thinking in your community]”, Rianne emphasizes, explaining her criteria for belonging to her orthodox in-group as follows:

People I feel affiliated with are convinced that the bible is the absolute truth. And people I don't feel affiliated with just take parts of the bible seriously, or just don't share my beliefs.

While being part of a like-minded religious community is deemed important in these circles, the like-mindedness is in fact more important than community life itself. The congregation gets together for church services, but does not organize many other social events, “because that is a mere side issue” (Theo). Even though several respondents are involved in voluntary work, such as helping refugees, solidarity with outsiders is not a big issue. Rhodé even suggests that such solidarity is only important because “it gives a positive image of us as Christians, and that's what it's all about”. Discussing the orthodox Protestant sense of solidarity, Leo reflexively refers to “salvation-selfishness” [Dutch: heilsegoïsmen], an “individualism along the lines of ‘I don't bother about the rest of the world, as long as me and my wife know we are saved’”. This is fuelled by the orthodox belief of utter dependency on God's mercy:

This core belief has major implications, not only for the vertical relationship [with God], but also for the horizontal relationship [with men]. God says: ‘Love me above all and your neighbour as yourself’. Only if that vertical relationship applies to you personally through the blood of Christ, a horizontal relationship with men is possible. (...) So, if people say, ‘It [being saved] is also possible by doing well and being friendly’, that is beyond the boundaries of what I believe. I think it is important, but it can only flow from the vertical relationship with God (Theo).

In the end, the utter dependency on God frustrates the forging and sustaining of group solidarity, and religious consensus is the exception rather than the rule. Many “disagree with some ideas” (Roos), often even with “the minister or the sermon” (Rhodé). Since religious truth is more important than religious community in these circles, sermons are frequently condemned as “too general, they have to be more explicit” (Ineke), or as missing “half of the truth” (Roos). Jasper recounts how he objected to a sermon by a liberal preacher on the grounds that “it was actually just a

social talk, i.e., ‘You have to look after each other’ and that sort of things”. Rhodé even accuses a pastor of “defying God”, while Hans observes that an elder’s reliance on a “mistaken” translation of a sermon “proves that he is not involved in the truth”.

Because finding religious truth is ultimately a personal responsibility, ministers face the risk of losing their credibility or legitimacy, inciting believers to move to a new congregation. “One is allowed to leave if truth is not provided”, Rianne underscores, while Hans points out that “followers will [then] be taught by the Lord himself (...) to distinguish between what is true and what is not” (Hans). This is precisely what Hans eventually decided to do himself: “I could not tolerate it anymore; it was so bad!” [emphasis in original]. For the same reason Roos left her congregation to join another one, where “for now” she “feels at home”. “But”, she adds, “the absolute truth is with God”.

Even though orthodox Protestantism features tight communities of like-minded believers, in short, these congregations tend to be precarious, because humans are seen as fallible and the truth as residing with God alone.

5.2. Liberal-Protestant Solidarity: An Open, Inclusive Network

Due to liberal Protestants’ characteristic unwillingness to define themselves as members of narrowly circumscribed religious communities, church attendance here lacks the pivotal status it has in orthodox Protestantism. Missing church services is not a big issue and some of our interlocutors, like Nadia, hardly attend at all. When asked why she does not visit church services more often, Nadia responds that she can also find inspiration elsewhere: “I don’t need to become a member of (...) a ‘complete’ community”. “There are enough people around me and I already have enough input, because I am also involved in a new meditation course”, she observes, adding: “when one has meditated all Saturday, it is simply too much to go to church on Sunday”. In line with such spiritual perennialism, the church services of our interlocutors’ congregations boast openness and diversity. Sermons and rituals like baptizing or the public confession of faith do not have a fixed format but are often adjusted to personal interests. Nienke points out how the sermons in her congregation are “sometimes [taken] from the bible, sometimes [based on] an Islamic fairy tale; once Derk Das [a children’s book; DH/AP/RL] came across, or something Buddhist, or singing bowls: everything is possible”.

Religious community and solidarity are nonetheless important for liberal Protestants. Even Nadia, who does not visit church services anymore, repeatedly emphasizes that “connection is very important for me, [i.e.] that I have connections with human beings”. Indeed, defining the divine in terms of an impersonal power residing in the inner selves of all individuals gives

rise to the notion that the divine makes itself present “if we connect everything together, if love is flowing” (Dirk). “I like the idea that (as the bible says), ‘If more than two [people] meet that is where I [God] am’”, Niels stipulates, adding: “That you meet each other and are able to piece the ideas of each of you together, focusing them in a new way into something stronger, something sublime.” According to the liberal Protestants, open and diverse networks are as such indispensable to prevent narrow-mindedness and dogmatism, and to maintain the infinite spiritual quest they value so much:

The more you celebrate the differences, the more they disappear (...). Then you are going to discover the unity of people, and the unity of ideas (...). By swimming back and forth through the differences, you become closer to each other, and probably to God as the unity. (Niels)

This appreciation of otherness and difference explains why Nadia is involved in a variety of loosely organized religious and spiritual initiatives, ranging from an ecumenical Christian congregation to a Buddhist meditation course, an anthroposophical nutrition training, and a craniosacral therapy training. Nelleke, who has many Islamic friends and a non-religious husband, recounts that at a particular moment many of her non-Muslim friends assumed that she was about to convert to Islam, because “almost all of my friends were Muslim”. Dirk even points out how much he appreciates participation in a community that boasts “rather strict and rather liberal persons [alike], (...) because [then] one never knows the opinion of others about a certain topic, so there is always a reason to ask each other about it”.

In tandem with offering opportunities for spiritual growth, a religiously diverse network is seen as facilitating “expressing love to all people (...), so not only being busy with yourself, but above all with the people around you” (Trijntje). Dirk similarly refers to church services as “[occasions] where I meet a small group of people who share the inspiration to do something together for others.” Discussing the implications of his transition from an orthodox to a liberal understanding of the divine, Milan explains this as follows:

In the past I have been busy with the life after this life. Then I thought that you have to live in preparation for heaven, for the afterlife. But if you don't believe that anymore, your mission in life changes. Yeah, now I think that we have to create a heaven within this life (...) [So] it is your purpose to just care for yourself and for each other. For by doing so you will show something divine.
[emphasis in original]

This illustrates a pivotal conviction among the interviewed liberal Protestants: God can be experienced if “a place is created where people take care of each other, give second chances (...), and show mercy for each other” (Dirk). The resulting solidarity does not remain limited to a narrowly defined religious in-group, but everyone is welcome: “Open the doors!”, Niels declares, “welcome people, help them, look after them.” In a word, the liberal Protestant understanding of the divine as an impersonal, immanent spirit informs a notion of solidarity that is inclusive, network-like, and without strict boundaries.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Different understandings of the divine and of religious authority inform profound differences between orthodox and liberal Protestantism as far as solidarity and community are concerned. Even though the orthodox prefer tightly knit and theologically homogeneous religious communities, the latter are difficult to sustain in practice and remain precarious and vulnerable due to the primacy of the personal relationship with God. Liberal Protestants understand such orthodox ideals, just like the difficulties in sustaining them, as stemming from narrow-mindedness. They themselves espouse inclusive and network-like communities without strictly defined boundaries.

Whether one of the two strains of Protestantism boasts more solidarity than the other is an awkward question. For on the one hand the answer could be ‘the orthodox’, because even though their radical religious individualism makes community hard to sustain, they clearly aim for tightly-knit and religiously homogeneous communities of the type that comes close to Durkheim’s ‘mechanical’ solidarity. On the other hand, however, the answer could be ‘the liberals’, precisely because they abhor such tightly knit and homogeneous communities to embrace a decidedly inclusive logic that rejects the exclusion of religious others. ‘Solidarity’, in other words, is an essentially contested concept that comes in as many flavours as there are religious and political outlooks (see Laermans and Houtman in this volume).

Indeed, Weber’s account of the role of Protestantism in contributing to the breakthrough of modernity is not without difficulties. For while he may well have been right that the orthodox type of Protestantism that he discusses in *The Protestant Ethic* has played such a historical role, it is also quite clear that discontents about precisely this orthodoxy have incited the formation of a more liberal Protestantism that boasts very different understandings of the divine, of religious authority and of solidarity. More than that, this liberal type of Protestantism has been no less influential in

shaping modernity than its orthodox counterpart. Not only has it paved the way for the type of post-Christian spirituality that has grown since the Christian churches entered their crisis in the 1960s (Campbell 2007, Houtman and Mascini 2002, McLeod 2007), but it has also stimulated a more general Romantic turn in the West, with all the appreciation of desire, experience, myth and authenticity this entails (Campbell 1983, 1987).

Conceptual problems do also haunt Durkheim's notion of religion as by definitional fiat gluing communities together. Indeed, this notion appears difficult to reconcile – if at all – with his early claims about Protestantism in *Suicide* (1951 [1897]). For whereas his analysis of egoistic suicide suggests that Protestantism is less capable of sustaining solidarity than Catholicism, this may imply either that Protestantism is 'less religious' than Catholicism, or that Durkheim's notion of religion as by definition entailing solidarity is flawed (Pickering 1984, p. 436-439). For while orthodox Protestantism sets 'the sacred' more decidedly apart from 'the profane' than most other religions do, it is ironically precisely this religious dualism that creates problems in sustaining and maintaining a firm sense of group solidarity.

It is also important in this context to point out that 'the sacred' has for the late Durkheim in principle nothing to do with supernatural entities. Indeed, the liberal Protestantism discussed above converges strikingly (apart from its lack of rationalist underpinnings) with the quintessentially modern 'religion of humanity' that Durkheim (1973 [1898], p. 48) advocated as a collective embrace of individualism that "springs not from egoism, but from sympathy for all that is human". David Bloor (1991 [1976], p. 46-54) has even observed that under conditions of rationalist modernity religion itself can be understood as 'the profane', so that it needs to be kept from polluting science, which under these conditions stands out as 'the sacred'.

To prevent the study of religion from degenerating into religious identity politics informed by misplaced notions of 'real' religion, then, the question of what religion 'really' or 'essentially' is, is better abandoned altogether in favour of an open and pragmatic analysis of whether and how cultural understandings of the sacred inform solidary modes of existence.

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