

# **Religion and the Matter of Community: The Vicissitudes of Protestantism**

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## **Abstract**

This article demonstrates how orthodox and liberal Protestant understandings of the sacred give rise to two distinct types of social cohesion that are generally overlooked in the sociology of religion. In line with the conceptualization by the late Durkheim, religion is often identified as by definitional fiat gluing communities with shared values. This essentialist definition of religion however obscures the diverse meanings attributed to the concept of community among religions which do not assign authority to religious communities. We argue on the basis of in-depth interviews that the latter do encourage social cohesion, although of a different nature. Orthodox Protestantism is able to spark tightly-knit and theologically homogeneous religious communities directed to teaching the truth. The liberal Protestant doctrine of perennialism, on the other hand, provokes inclusive and network-like communities that fulfill the need of creating God in bonding together. Given these findings, it should be the vital endeavor of sociologists of religion to abandon distinctions between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ religions, and to unravel how religious ideas inspire ways of socializing, and modes of solidarity.

Keywords: Liberal Protestantism, Orthodox Protestantism, Religious Communities, Social Cohesion, Religious Solidarity.

# Religion and the Matter of Community: The Vicissitudes of Protestantism

## 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.

These are fragments<sup>1</sup> from the final episode of the television series *Toen was geloof nog heel gewoon* [Back then, faith was still very normal] on religious change in the Netherlands. The episode portrays orthodox Protestants in the Dutch Bible Belt as exemplifying a deeply religious community that “stick[s] to the old [traditions]”. Presenter Andries Knevel points out how their religious doctrines profoundly shape their cultural outlook on the world and give rise to high levels of church attendance and strikingly closed, self-contained and cohesive religious communities.

Seen through a sociological lens, the depicted believers are the contemporary heirs of Max Weber’s orthodox Protestants who back in the sixteenth century revolted against the Catholic church and unintendedly furthered western modernity, especially modern capitalism (1978 [1904-1905]). Unlike the Catholic church, these Protestants firmly dismissed the notion of a sacred presence in the world, and by implication also rejected the authority of church elites acting and speaking legitimately on behalf of God. While making God more radically transcendent than he had ever been before, the Reformation disenchanting the world and opened it up for unscrupulous scientific

analysis and technological intervention (Weber 1948 [1919]).

Notwithstanding the canonical status of *The Protestant Ethic* within the sociology of religion, not Weber but Durkheim gives special attention to the implications of religion for social cohesion. Whereas the early Durkheim of *The Division of Labor in Society* (1964 [1893]) firmly rejects the notion that religion can sustain cohesion in modern industrial societies, this is precisely the position defended by the late Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]). It is clear that there exists a marked tension between these two understandings of the relationship between religion and social cohesion, witness for instance the early Durkheim's claim in *Suicide* (1951 [1897]) that Protestantism does not so much sustain community but rather erodes it, at least in comparison to Catholicism. This ambivalent position looks all the more intriguing from the perspective of the just made observation, i.e., that orthodox Protestant communities in the Dutch Bible Belt are in fact deemed to be strikingly closed, self-contained and socially cohesive.

Does Protestantism further social cohesion or not? In order to answer this question, we first discuss Durkheim's ideas on religion and community in some more detail and subsequently underline the importance of types of religiosity when looking to the social implications of religion. We then move to an empirical exploration of the relationship between understandings of the sacred in two types of Protestantism, i.e., orthodox and liberal, and community. We do so by means of qualitative interview data collected by the first author among self-defined orthodox and liberal Protestants. 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.

## **The Power of Religion in Shaping Communities**

### ***Durkheim on Religion and Protestantism***

There are basically two different Durkheim's (cf. Lukes 1985). The first is the early, positivist Durkheim discussed in most introductory textbooks in sociology, i.e., the Durkheim of the division of labor (1964 [1893]), of social facts (1964 [1895]) and of suicide rates (1951 [1897]). The second Durkheim is the author of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]) and *Primitive Classification* (Durkheim and Mauss 1963 [1903]). The intellectual significance of the late one lies more in the fields of sociology of religion and cultural anthropology than in general sociology. Even though the two Durkheim's 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 critiques Auguste Comte's notion that in modern industrial societies, solidarity can be based on religion and shared moral norms and values (Gouldner 1958). Rather than on cultural similarities between people ('mechanical solidarity'), the 'organic solidarity' typifying modernity rests on differences pertaining to occupational activities, embodied by the division of labor. Yet, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]) the late Durkheim comes very close to the Comtean position he initially dismissed. He now conceives religion as a very abstract concept that constitutes a major source of cohesion in and of itself in any type of society, so traditional and modern alike. Religion is defined by the late Durkheim 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], 44). Central to his understanding of religion is hence “the notion that religion must be an eminently collective thing” (1995 [1912], 44): it voices the central values of society and embodies them in shared rituals, since that society itself constitutes the origin, the source of authority, and the aim of religion (Laermans 2014, 27). During the course of his career, then, Durkheim profoundly reinterprets religion: it changes from a relic of the past that cannot sustain the modern social order into a quintessential source of collective cohesion in every society. Moreover, the late Durkheim emphasizes the coming into being of a single form of unifying religion within modernity. This modern religion deifies humanity in general, thus overcoming local or social differences, and institutes the ‘cult of the individual’ (Durkheim 2012 [1925]).

Durkheim’s altered view on the relationship between religion and community gives rise to an intriguing paradox in his treatment of Protestantism. For in *Suicide* (1951 [1897]) the early Durkheim argues that religions differ in their cohesion-providing potential, and therefore in their capacity to protect individuals against meaninglessness and suicide. Catholic countries and the Anglican Church in the UK, he demonstrates by means of suicide statistics, do a markedly better job in this respect than Protestant ones. In *Suicide* Durkheim hence treats Protestantism as the ‘other’ of Catholicism: a religious tradition that epitomizes the modern dissolution of pre-given cultural orders sustaining social cohesion. Whether Durkheim’s empirical observations are actually correct may remain open here: we are primarily interested in whether his characterization of Protestantism in *Suicide* can be reconciled with his later notion of community as being central to every religion. For if Protestantism is less successful in forging community than Catholicism, then either Durkheim’s claim that social cohesion is a universal feature of religion is mistaken or Protestantism is less of a ‘real’ religion

than Catholicism.

In his discussion of Durkheim's sociology of religion Pickering (1984, 438-439) points out that much criticism implies that Durkheim in fact fails to understand Protestantism. On the one hand, Durkheim seems to be correct in his argument that Protestantism lacks the resources to provide shared values and rituals to secure cohesion and community. Indeed, the rejection of any religious authority other than a purely transcendent God makes Protestantism susceptible to doubt-driven personal quests for religious certainty and makes religious community difficult to attain and sustain (Bruce 1985; Symonds and Pudsey 2006). Disagreements within Protestantism about what the Bible, understood in these circles as God's revealed word, 'really' says potentially result in fragmentation and schism. On the other hand, Pickering counters Durkheim's thesis in *Suicide* (1951 [1897]) with many examples of Protestants groups "amongst whom there existed at the time he wrote, and still exist, a great sense of community and integration" (1984, 436). Pickering therefore argues for the need to pay attention to Protestantism's diversity when studying its capacity for cohesion.

### ***Disentangling Religion and Community***

Indeed, rather than studying whether or not religious ideas are successful in forging community, it is more fruitful to study the relationships between various forms of religiosity and distinct types of social cohesion. The typology introduced by Ernst Troeltsch (1992 [1912]) at the beginning of the twentieth century offers a particularly helpful starting point.<sup>2</sup> Besides 'mystical' religion, he distinguishes 'sect' religion from 'church' religion, which is echoed by Linda Woodhead's (2014) distinction between 'biblical' Christianity and 'church' Christianity. The latter type of religion 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 therefore not a deliberate personal act: one is 'born into' a community and its church and remains in principle a member until one's final days. This model of religion features a priesthood that mediates between God and the community of believers, since it can effectively act and speak on behalf of God. Consequently, the church model of religion assumes an outspoken religious hierarchy in which the priesthood is understood as more or less sacred in and of itself, and, hence, as less profane than rank-and-file church members. The Roman Catholic church comes closest to this first model of religion as defined by Troeltsch. Also, the 'church' model is clearly implied by Durkheim's notion of religion as entailing "one single community called a Church" (1995 [1912], 44).

By underscoring the sole authority of God and firmly rejecting the notion that the sacred can be magically manipulated or found in the world, orthodox strands of Protestantism constitute examples of Troeltsch's 'sect' model of religion. The latter features a critical rejection of society, because measured against God's strict commandments the world as it is inevitably falls short. Religion is not about being a loyal member of a church and a community but about obeying God – about being a pious believer according to His commandments rather than those of a church and its leaders. This type of Protestantism boasts a radical distinction between the world and 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. Hence, orthodox Protestants cannot rely on church authority in telling them how to live but have the Bible as their only guideline.

Yet ever since its sixteenth-century origins, orthodox Protestantism has been critiqued from within the bosom of Protestantism itself, most recently by the so-called 'demythologization movement' of the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Campbell 2007). In trying

to protect Protestantism from a loss of legitimacy and plausibility in a pluralistic and secularized environment (cf. Berger 1979), liberal Protestantism sparked a marked theological shift towards an understanding of the Bible as being not so much historically and literally ‘true’, but rather as a collection of myths that can help individuals to understand themselves and their lives. Abandoning the traditional Protestant notion of a transcendent personal God in favor of a conception of the divine as an immanently present spirit or life force, liberal Protestantism regards itself as the successor of orthodox Protestantism (Campbell 2007). It strikingly differs from Troeltsch’s ‘sect’ model and does in fact come close to his third model of religion, i.e., ‘mystical religion’, referred to by Woodhead (2004) as ‘mystical Christianity’. This mysticism foregrounds personal piety and the experience of the divine over religion’s external, institutional and/or doctrinal aspects (see also Daiber 2002).

Hereafter we compare these two varieties of Protestantism in terms of the type of community they prefer against the background of their respective views on the sacred. The data stem from twenty in-depth interviews with 11 orthodox and 9 liberal Dutch Protestants. The interviews were conducted by the first author as part of her PhD project on the development of religious identities in relationship to self-defined religious diversity. Respondents have been selected by means of snowball sampling, making use of pre-existing networks in the Dutch Bible Belt (orthodox Protestants) and in progressive Protestant congregations (liberal Protestants). Even though articulations of community and solidarity were not the principal subject of the interviews, the data proved sufficiently rich to enable the analysis presented in this paper.<sup>3</sup>

## **Orthodox Protestants: Precarity of a Tight Community**

“God is, He exists” [emphasis added], both Rhodé and Renske express the orthodox Protestant belief in God as a real Being. These respondents firmly distinguish between the divine realm and the human one and conceive God as a radically transcendent, person-like entity: He is “a powerful Being” (Hans), “Somebody – with a capital ‘S’” (Theo) who is “much higher than humans like us” (Renske), “exalted in heaven, while I am here” (Rianne). Moreover, this transcendent divine Being is understood 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), the “King of kings” (Rianne) “who has the absolute power and rules our lives” (Roos).

Because God is attained to possess the absolute power, He is conceived as embodying “the Truth” (Rhodé), “the solid foundation that does not change” (Rianne). Central to this 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). However, while human beings are supposed “to serve and love God”, to quote an often-used expression, they are simultaneously understood as humble, impure and sinful by nature. They are “inclined

by nature to hate God and other people”, 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” and, hence, as a deeply felt “dependency on Him, (...) [because] a human being cannot add anything at all” (Hans).

In line with their dualist understanding of the relationship between God and humanity, our orthodox respondents do not assign much religious authority to religious leaders or religious communities. 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 men. 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 these respondents. Hence, in trying to serve God and live up to His commandments our respondents scrupulously “seek for purity” (Sietske), for “clear-cut and unambiguous answers” (Leo), for “black-white” clarity (Hans).

Finding clear-cut answers about God’s Truth is deemed the central aim of the orthodox Protestants’ tightly organized religious communities as well. Our 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. “Everything was strongly related; church and school taught the same ideas, as did

family (...) I sometimes took part in a youth camp from the [orthodox Protestant] Jeugdbond: all very safe”, Rianne summarizes. “It is important to have unity [of thinking in your community]” she stresses, explaining her criteria for the in-group:

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.

Being attached to a community with shared ideas about the one and only Truth is important, because the community is meant “to miss not the opportunity to be reconciled [with God]”, Leo argues. Gods' Truth is deemed to be “taught by the regular preaching about and reading of the bible” (Jasper). Therefore, Theo declares:

The one and only thing you need to learn in church if you want to enter heaven in the afterlife (...) is about the truth of being personally saved by the blood of Christ.

The respondents, hence, “pre-eminently expect from the pastor that he teaches the ultimate Truth”, as Hans states.

Defining community in terms of finding the truth about reconciling the individual relationship with God implies that the orthodox respondents do not assign much value to community life itself. The congregation only assembles to listen to the sermon and does not organize many social meetings, “since that is a mere side issue” (Theo). Jasper even 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’”. Even though several respondents are involved in voluntary work, such as helping refugees, solidarity with outsiders is not a big issue either. Rhodé even suggests that the latter is only important because “it gives a positive image of us as Christians, and that's what it's all about”. Describing 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’”. The lack of efforts to shape the solidarity within the community is further fuelled by the orthodox belief of utter dependency on God’s mercy in doing so, which Theo summarizes as follows:

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 neighbor 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.

In the end, the doctrine of utter dependency on God in understanding the absolute Truth tends to frustrate forging and sustaining a community that is centred on being taught by the latter. Indeed, the respondents variously point out that within their own congregations, religious consensus is rather the exception than the rule. Many “disagree with some ideas” (Roos) and often also with “the minister or the sermon” (Rhodé). Moreover, sermons are frequently condemned as “too general, they have to be more explicit” (Ineke), or as missing “half of the truth” (Roos). Therefore, Rhodé accuses a pastor of “defeating God”, while Hans argues that an elder “proves that he is not involved in the truth” when using a wrong translation of a certain preach. Since providing Truth is considered to be the main legitimation of the community, “you are allowed to leave if Truth is not provided”, Rianne points out. This freedom is further justified by the perceived imperfectness of people in finding the Truth, which ultimately

means that “followers will [just] be taught by the Lord Himself (...) to distinguish between what is true and what is not” (Hans). This implies that ministers face the risk of losing their credibility or legitimacy, which may subsequently incite believers to move to a new congregation that better suits their personal interpretation of the Truth. This is precisely what Hans eventually decided to do: “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”.

Though featured by tightly organized communities with narrow boundaries around like-minded believers, all this confirms that the communities of orthodox Protestants are not meant to protect the community itself. Instead, the community’s prime reason of existence is to teach individuals the absolute Truth that transcends the community, i.e., about how to become reconciled as an individual believer with a transcendent God. However, since God is deemed to own and even to be the absolute Truth, the legitimacy of these communities is always precarious. Only by interpreting the Bible as God’s given word as correct as possible, the Truth of God – and hence the boundaries of the group – can be approached, preventing individuals to be deceived for eternal life.

### **Liberal Protestants: Inclusive Solidarity in a Network-like Community**

For the liberal Protestants, “God is not (...) a somebody”, as Nienke argues. Instead, she defines the divine as “a sort of goodness and beauty (...), a source that consists of energy (...), a source of love”. These respondents are therefore not talking about a

transcendent or person-like God, but rather about an omnipresent impersonal divine spirit that immanently emerges “bottom up”, to use the words of Niels. Hence, “a glimmer of the divine” (Nienke) resides within every single person: “everybody possesses a piece and these [pieces] are together God” (Nadia). This also means that on the individual level God is 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 points out when motivating his difficulties in voicing his image of God.

This image of God among the liberal respondents invokes an understanding of religious authority that is definitely not located in rigidly defined boundaries between religions. Like the orthodox Protestants they appreciate the Bible, yet they do not consider it “a law book” but rather regard it as a major source of inspiration, “a starting point for an explorative conversation” (Trijntje). More generally, Niels defines religious books as “human writings” and advices to “stay responsible yourself!”, pointing to the principal injunction is to “really find [it] within yourself” (Trijntje). In the same spirit, Nadia underscores the role of self-meditation to “get rid of your ego and go back to the nature of your spirit”. She specifies the latter as a state of “judgementlessness” [Dutch: oordeelloosheid], which she positions against “the ego (...) [i.e.] norms and values, actually everything what is considered by people”. Obviously, the divine piece within every individual is perceived to be polluted by conformity, or even loyalty, to religious institutions, traditions, and doctrines. Lara feels therefore embarrassed “when something is imposed” to her, or “if someone wants to indoctrinate you”. The liberal respondents “cannot accord with too much morality, i.e., everything what goes in the direction of ‘homosexuals are dirty’ or ‘you’re not allowed to do this on Sunday’” (Niels). He emphasizes that the norm of staying away from a too absolute morality also

applies to the self:

The more I learned to demolish my own ideas, the more I actually had religious experiences. The more I left hold of everything I knew for sure, the more I discovered my faith.

The need to escape a fixed, doctrinal interpretation of truth is secured by a spiritual seekership that is remarkably open to many different sources of religious authority. Like the orthodox Protestants, the liberal believers find it important to “stay in contact with the divine” (Nadia), to “always seek God, or something of him, her or whatever it is”. However, unlike the orthodox Protestants, this desired seekership is not experienced as the necessity to ultimately attain the ‘real’ religious Truth. It is rather the other way around: our respondents feel that they have already found the eternal spiritual truth. Central to latter is the notion that the divine cannot be meaningfully captured by institutions or universally valid doctrines but can only emerge through an everlasting seeking. “We share the wish for seeking, and we are content with it”, Lara summarizes the stance of her religious community. Seeking is realized by “absorbing information [and] just having an open mind to everything”, Trijntje points out, through which expression she demonstrates a spiritual attitude of perennialism according to which all religions are equally valid, because they ultimately all worship the same divine source (Aupers and Houtman 2006). In characteristic perennialist fashion Niels also argues how scattered the sources of religious authority are: “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”.

Due to the liberal Protestantism’s characteristic unwillingness to define oneself as a member of a narrowly conceived religious community, church attendance lacks the status of a fixed and central element in religious life. Missing church services is not a

big issue and some of our interlocutors, like Nadia, hardly attend them at all. When asked why she does not visit church services more often, Nadia responds that she can be inspired at other places as well: “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 adds: “when one has meditated all Saturday, it is simply too much to go to church on Sunday”. In line with the professed spiritual perennialism, the church services of our interlocutors’ congregations boast much 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”. Hence, the liberal Protestant definition of the divine neither invokes a Durkheimian’ type of community authoritatively imposing shared values, nor results in a community that is just meant to teach the absolute divine Truth like in orthodox Protestantism.

Nevertheless, community is 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 that is scattered over the inner selves of all individuals ensures that the former can only be known in an enriched version “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, diverse communities are the indispensable and unifying requirement to prevent hatred dogmatism and to maintain the unending spiritual quest they value:

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, to an anthroposophical nutrition training, to a craniosacral therapy training. Also, many friends of Nelleke, who grew up in a Protestant family and still defines herself in that way, assumed she was about to convert to Islam because “almost all of my friends were Muslim”. She still has many close Islamic friends as well as a non-religious husband who she happily holds to feed her religious identity. 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”.

Besides offering spiritual profits, a diverse community is perceived to constitute the divine in a practical sense. Pivotal to this is “expressing love to all people (...), so not only being busy with yourself, but above all with the people around you” (Trijntje). Dirk also refers to this mission of creating solidarity when defining a church service as “an occasion where I meet a small group of people who share the inspiration to do something together for others.” How this stress on solidarity relates to the liberal Protestants’ religious beliefs is probably best described by Milan when he discusses the

implications of his change from an orthodox Protestant to a liberal Protestant image of God:

In the past I've been busy with the live *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 in doing so you'll show something divine.  
[emphasis in original]

This citation illustrates a core conviction among the interviewed liberal Protestants: if God is perceived in an immanent way, community is not only important to create God but also functions as the recipient of the divine love. God is experienced “once a place is created where people take care of each other, give second chances (...), and show mercy for each other”, Dirk points out. The desired type of solidarity does not remain limited to a narrowly defined religious in-group. Instead, everyone is welcome: “Open the doors!”, Niels declares, “welcome people, help them, look after them”, adding that proselytizing is not a legitimate by-end: “I wish all people good luck with the religious ideas that fit them best”. In a word, the liberal Protestant understanding of the divine as an impersonal, immanent spirit informs notions of community and solidarity that are inclusive, network-like, and without strict boundaries.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Our findings suggest that distinct understandings of the divine and of religious authority inform profound differences between orthodox and liberal Protestantism when it comes

to the function and scope of community. Whereas our orthodox Protestant respondents stress the personal relationship with God and His Truth above communal bonds and prefer theologically homogeneous communities, the interviewed liberal Protestants define God as an immanent spiritual force that is at work when people unite, which in turn encourages an inclusive, network-like view on community and solidarity. Though we are of course aware of the limits of our qualitative data, some more general lessons may be inferred from them regarding the definition of religion.

As discussed earlier, the conceptualization of religion by the late Durkheim as by definitional fiat gluing communities together is difficult to reconcile with his early claims about Protestantism in *Suicide*. On the basis of his analysis of egoistic suicide, Durkheim argues that Protestantism is less capable of sustaining social cohesion than Catholicism. Durkheim neither discusses how both claims are related, nor calls Protestantism ever ‘no real religion’, yet the scarce references throughout his work seem to imply that his attitude towards Protestantism “was tepid, if not cold” (Pickering, 1984, 435). Indeed, especially the orthodox Protestant’ sense of community that encourages schism by surpassing the authority of the community is difficult to interpret from Durkheim’s understanding of ‘real religion’. However, it is striking to note how the markedly individualist and inclusive religious logic boasted by liberal Protestantism does in fact converge with the type of ‘religion of humanity’ that particularly the late Durkheim advocates. For while the humanistic religion he called for was surely massively individualistic, he went to great efforts to point out how it entailed a collectively embraced individualism – an individualism that “springs not from egoism, but from sympathy for all that is human” (Durkheim 1973 [1898], 48). Of course, some of the other characteristics of liberal Protestantism, i.e., the lack of a pre-defined divine community, the absence of an absolute authority of shared values, and the diversity and

loose organization of the implied forms of collective life, are more difficult to reconcile with Durkheim's understanding of religion.

Contemporary notions of religion are generally informed by a simplified version of Durkheim's interpretation in terms of a community held together by a strong 'collective consciousness'. Surprisingly, however, orthodox Protestantism is considered as more 'real' religious than liberal Protestantism nowadays. The television series 'Toen was geloof nog heel gewoon' [Back then, faith was still very normal], from which we quoted at the beginning of this article, portrays the orthodox Protestant Dutch Bible Belt as the principal remnant of religion in secularized Dutch society, because it is "a closely-knit community" that boasts "church services [that] are overcrowded instead of depopulated". Academic discourse often echoes these identifications of religion with community. Studies into 'strong' religion, like the one of Christian Smith on American Evangelicalism, justify this qualification on the basis 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" (1998, 20-21). Smith thus singles out group participation as a principal indicator for the strength of religion. In line with this argument, sociologists of religion have traditionally regarded church membership and (even more so) church attendance as central indicators of the degree of secularization in the Christian world (Bruce 2002; Halman and Draulans 2006; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Voas and Doebler 2011). If both indicators decrease, religion is supposed to become less strong and to give way to a secular, non-religious lifestyle. Due to this, spiritual movements that profoundly dislike and reject religious institutions and organizations have incessantly been portrayed as strictly personal, ephemeral, uncommitted, shallow and superficial – as in effect 'not really' religious, because 'too individualized' (see for an extensive discussion of this

point: Aupers and Houtman 2006; Houtman and Tromp forthcoming; Lynch 2007, 40-70; Woodhead 2010).

It is striking to observe that Durkheim's definition of 'real' religion would effectively differ from the present common definition when it is combined with our findings of pertaining to orthodox and liberal Protestantism. Therefore, in this study, such essentialist accounts of religion and community are abandoned in favor of a cultural sociological approach in which the elective affinity (Weber's 'Wahlverwantschaft') between different definitions of the divine and distinct understandings of community is disentangled. It demonstrates that, contrary to the ideas of the young Durkheim, orthodox Protestantism is able to spark tightly knit and theologically homogeneous religious communities that serve the aim of teaching truth, though the latter are difficult to sustain and remain precarious due to the primacy of the personal relationship with God. Moreover, against the expectation of academics and common-sense images liberal Protestant tenets of religious perennialism and individual freedom also result in community building, i.e., in inclusive and network-like communities that fulfil the perceived need of creating God in bonding together. Given these findings and those on the sociality going together with the many expressions of 'new spirituality', it should be the vital endeavor of both cultural sociology and the sociology of religion to break away from (religious) identity politics, to refuse distinctions between 'real' and 'unreal' religions, and to unravel the complex ways in which religious ideas inspire meaning giving, ways of socializing, and modes of solidarity.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See: “Toen was geloof nog heel gewoon: De Biblebelt”, August 26th, 2017 at NPO via [https://www.npo.nl/toen-was-geloof-heel-gewoon/26-08-2017/VPWON\\_1273652](https://www.npo.nl/toen-was-geloof-heel-gewoon/26-08-2017/VPWON_1273652).

<sup>2</sup> Troeltsch was a theologian but had sociological interests. His work features major similarities with Weber’s work on religion. This even applies to the extent that Karl Mannheim (1935) has observed in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* that “(...) his most significant empirical sociological investigation *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (...) may be considered a supplement to the works of Max Weber” (Graf 2014, 325).

<sup>3</sup> The interviews took three to six hours each. During each interview, the respondent was asked to narrate his or her religious biography freely, focusing on the self-definition of past and current religious identities on the one hand, of the definition of and reaction to religious otherness on the other. The interviews were fully transcribed; for this article’s sake, definitions of the sacred, of religious authority, and of community and solidarity were coded and mutually compared. To protect the privacy of the respondents, pseudonyms are used in the quotations.

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