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Editors

# Shifting Solidarities

Trends and Developments in European  
Societies

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## Religion and Solidarity: The Vicissitudes of Protestantism

Dick Houtman, Anneke Pons, and Rudi Laermans

### 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)

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Common characterisations of orthodox Protestantism like the one above portray it as boasting high degrees of solidarity. Such depictions echo the tendency in sociology of religion to define “strong” religion in terms of “the ability of a movement or organisation 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: 20–21). This entails a classical Durkheimian understanding of religion, according to which the latter constitutes a powerful source of solidarity in modern and traditional societies alike, with solidarity being informed and sustained by shared conceptions of what is sacred and what is profane.

This Durkheimian approach understands both religion and solidarity as quintessentially social phenomena, situated at the supra-individual group level. It leaves completely open how groups or communities may define the boundary between the sacred and the profane, and in effect also that between themselves (“insiders”) and others (“outsiders”). This Durkheimian approach as such differs profoundly from understandings of solidarity as an individual trait, which incite researchers to address differences between individuals in the degree to which they are deemed “solidaristic” (“John is less solidaristic than Peter”; “Mary is more solidaristic than Jane”). Such individualised notions of solidarity tend to be informed by morally charged and intellectually arbitrary notions of whom those concerned should ideally be solidary with in the first place (the working class, the elderly, the young, the poor, social security recipients, immigrants, fellow nationals, the Third World, gays and lesbians, animals, or what have you). Unlike the Durkheimian approach, such individualised and politicised understandings of solidarity essentialise, advocate and performatively sustain moral distinctions between “solidaristic good guys” and “non-solidaristic bad guys”, i.e. those who are and those who are not “solidaristic” with the group or category a researcher happens to fancy.

This is not the place to critique such intellectually debatable understandings of solidarity, but to introduce a puzzling ambiguity in Durkheim’s account of religion and solidarity. While Protestantism, especially in its orthodox guise, surely draws rigid boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the early positivist Durkheim of *Suicide* (1951

[1987]) nonetheless maintained that it is hardly successful in forging cohesive religious communities. How can that be? A related problem is that given Durkheim's claim that distinctions between the sacred and the profane inform group boundaries it does not even appear to make sense to address the issue of "Protestantism and solidarity" at that level of generality. For Protestantism constitutes a notoriously mixed bag, with orthodox and liberal currents differing profoundly in terms of their understandings of the sacred, which is as such likely to result in major differences in definitions of group boundaries. In what follows we therefore study how different understandings of the sacred among orthodox and liberal Protestants inform different understandings of community and solidarity.

The balance between these two strains of Protestantism has shifted profoundly in the twentieth century, not least since the tumultuous 1960s, with orthodox Protestantism having become increasingly marginalised, exotic and eccentric and its liberal counterpart having become increasingly popular. Because we do not have historical data to trace the social implications of this shift, we address this issue indirectly by comparing the two strains of Protestantism in terms of their understandings of the sacred and the latter's implications for solidarity. While ethnographic data would obviously be ideal for such a comparison, we out of necessity rely on qualitative interview data collected by the second author. Before we present our findings, we discuss Durkheim's account of religion and solidarity in more detail, followed by a discussion of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch about how orthodox Protestant distinctions between the sacred and the profane appear to stand in the way of solidarity and community.

## Religion and Protestantism, Durkheim and Weber

### 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 & 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 frequently 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 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 initially had 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]: 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 (1951 [1897]) 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 epitomises 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 characterisation of Protestantism can be reconciled with Durkheim’s later notion that religion by definitional fiat provides solidarity. Max Weber’s account of Protestantism offers a valuable resource in addressing this question, not least because of its marked focus on orthodox Protestant understandings of the sacred.

## Weber on Protestantism and Modernity

Weber’s comparative analysis of the world religions foregrounds Protestantism’s combination of asceticism and inner-worldliness, which 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 rationalised 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 much 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 all sorts of supernatural spirits, forces and powers by radicalising the separation between the world and the divine.

This separation had long before been introduced by anti-magical ancient Judaism, but had subsequently been relativised 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 [1904–1904]: 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: 112) accurately summarises Weber's position when he concludes that “Protestantism served as a historically decisive prelude to secularisation, 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: 112–113).

Central to Weber's account of the role of orthodox Protestantism's in the breakthrough to modernity is hence its peculiar understanding of the sacred. Early orthodox Protestantism expelled the sacred from the world and came to understand the latter as strictly profane and void of



sacrality or meaning, while simultaneously conceiving of God as radically transcendent and residing in a world of his own. The work of Ernst Troeltsch, a German theologian with marked sociological interests, suggests that precisely this radical distinction between the sacred and the profane accounts for Protestantism's difficulties in generating solidarity and community. It is not without significance to point out that Troeltsch was one of Weber's closest 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: 325).

## Religious Dualism and the Vicissitudes of Protestantism

### Religious Dualism and Disenchantment

In Troeltsch's (1992 [1912]) terminology, the orthodox strain of Protestantism foregrounded by Weber epitomises "sect" religion as distinguishable from "church" religion, a distinction recently echoed by Linda Woodhead's (2004) between "biblical" Christianity, respectively, "church" Christianity. "Church" Christianity 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]: 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 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. 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 its 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 secularised 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, Achterberg, & Houtman, 2018). A recent article about decline of religion and religious change in the USA, the UK 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.

## Vicissitudes of Protestantism

The dualism-induced, doubt-driven quests for religious certainty do not only make Protestantism more prone than Catholicism to apostasy, 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 sole authority of God’s word as revealed by the bible and the religious dissent and fragmentation so easily fuelled by it have hence abundantly affected the Dutch religious landscape. 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. Weber asserted that 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). 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 the doctrine of predestination 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 Latinised 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 towards 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: 255).

An even further shift away from Calvinist orthodoxy took place during the period of rapid secularisation 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 “demythologisation 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 a transcendent personal God that needs to be believed in was exchanged for that of an immanently present spirit or life force that needs to be experienced (Campbell, 2007; Daiber, 2002; Streib and Hood, 2011). While this liberalisation of religion fitted the spirit of the 1960s and 1970s quite well (Houtman, 2008; Houtman, Aupers, & de Koster, 2011: 1–24; Musgrove, 1974), it has of course been hard to swallow in orthodox Protestant circles.

## Orthodox and Liberal Protestants: Samples and Data

### Interview Data

In what follows we compare orthodox and liberal Protestants, focusing on how their respective conceptions of the sacred, and hence 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 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). The interviews lasted three to six hours and pseudonyms are used in the quotations below for privacy reasons.

### 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 imposes 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 emphasises 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 summarises 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).

## 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 emphasises 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).

## **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.

### **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 emphasises, 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 organise 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: heilsegoïsme], 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 and 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.

### **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 baptising 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 emphasises 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 organised 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.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Consistent with Durkheim's account of religion as a source of solidarity, our interview data show that different understandings of the sacred give rise, indeed, to different construals of group boundaries and solidarity in orthodox and liberal Protestantism. Orthodox Protestantism, less numerous than it used to be due to processes of religious decline since the 1960s (McLeod, 2007; Norris and Inglehart, 2004), boasts tightly-knit

communities with clear boundaries. Liberal Protestantism, more numerous than it used to be due to processes of religious change during this same period (Campbell, 2007; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Houtman and Mascini, 2002), espouses inclusive and network-like communities without strictly defined boundaries. Contrasting understandings of the sacred hence inform and sustain solidarities that differ in breadth and openness to diversity.

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. This accounts for the contradictory claims by the early Durkheim of *Suicide* (1951 [1897]) and the late one of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]). Because those concerned conceive of God as radically transcendent and of the world as radically profane (see also Pons et al., 2019), solidarity becomes both narrowly defined and hard to sustain. Orthodox Protestants ultimately owe loyalty to God only, so that their fellow believers, like all others, can take no more than a back seat, which makes community vulnerable. Liberal Protestantism, to the contrary, understands the sacred as omnipresent in the world and hence permeating each and every individual and connecting “everything”. Because all people are as such taken to share in the same spirit, it spawns diverse, inclusive and network-like communities without strictly defined boundaries.

Even though the resulting exclusivist, respectively inclusivist solidarities in respectively orthodox and liberal Protestantism differ profoundly, the question which of them is “most solidaristic” is futile, because answering it requires morally informed criteria that are meaningless from an intellectual point of view—much like the individualised notions of solidarity referred to in the introduction. One answer could surely be “the orthodox”, because their tightly-knit and religiously homogeneous communities come close to Durkheim’s “mechanical” solidarity, however fragile and vulnerable the latter may be in this case. Another, equally (in)defensible answer could be “the liberals”, precisely because they abhor such tightly-knit and homogeneous communities to instead 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. To prevent the sociological study of solidarity from degenerating into political discourse, misplaced notions of “real” solidarity are therefore better abandoned altogether in favour of studies into how qualitatively different solidarities are informed by qualitatively different distinctions between the sacred and the profane.

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