

In Search of Authenticity

The Religiosity of Christian Evangelicals

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This thesis is submitted to Cardiff University in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTORATE OF PHILOSOPHY, 30th SEPTEMBER 2013.

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Summary

The dominant theories in the sociological literature identify religion with propositional belief in the transcendent and belonging to and attendance at religious services. This understanding of religion replicates a past Protestant model that fails to account for contemporary religious forms, including Protestant forms. Drawing on Georg Simmel, one of the fathers of sociology, the thesis makes a theoretical contribution by reinterpreting and systematising Simmel's notions of religiosity as a sensitivity, and of belief as trust, to enhance the understanding of contemporary individual religious identity. The use of these notions and of Simmel's nuanced perspective on individuality enables the development of a theoretical framework for the understanding of authenticity. The study focuses on individual religiosity, which has been largely neglected by the literature. The most influential theories that have paid attention to the role of the individual – rational choice theory and spirituality studies – have centred on individual self authority and neglected to conceptualise the self. Accordingly, the thesis provides a relational account of the self, on which to ground authenticity as a process of identity formation. The narratives and practices, which emerged from the empirical research, have revealed the construction of Christianity through the prism of authenticity, as a distinctive and 'truer' way of living. This construction of authentic Christianity testifies to a shift from doctrinal adherence to a more pluralistic discourse by emphasising an overarching ethics of compassion over exclusive claims to truth. Thus, pluralism offers Christian evangelicals the platform to articulate the particularistic tradition of Christianity, whilst retaining a claim to – what they understand to be – universal truth.

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I dedicate this work to my parents and to my late teacher Sante Amaduzzi, who in their own peculiar ways have instilled in me the curiosity and love for the works of the human mind.

“...I went into science a great deal myself at one time; but I saw it would not do. It leads to everything; you can let nothing alone.”

Mr Brooke, Middlemarch (Eliot 1872/2008, p. 16)

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Chapter One

In Search of Religion

1. Finding Georg Simmel

The thesis makes a contribution by proposing a theoretical framework in the sociology of religion for an understanding of the construction of individual religious identity. It achieves this by developing the concept of authenticity. I formulate authenticity in the thesis as a process of identity construction that requires interpretation of one's religious tradition (cf. chapter six), and participation in defining its boundaries by attributing value to its components (cf. chapter seven). This results from an interpretation and development of key notions in Georg Simmel's sociology of religion and ethnographic fieldwork in a Christian evangelical church in the UK. Simmel was one of the founders of sociology; yet, his work in sociology of religion has received relatively little attention. He has exercised enduring influence on scholars, such as Paul Heelas (2007 and 2008) and Kieran Flanagan

(1996; 2007; 2008). Nevertheless, Simmel's insights have suffered from lack of systematisation and application.

Simmel's approach to sociology of religion has been contrasted with that of Durkheim (Cipriani 1998; Simon 2006) and Troeltsch (Starr 1996). Watier (1996) presented Simmel's notion of religiosity as "diffused" religion, present in numerous manifestations, while Varga (2007) underlined its affinity with "spirituality". Similarly, McCole (2005) and Erickson (2001) explored its metaphysical aspects. Laermans (2006) analysed Simmel's work on religion in relation to his formal sociology, and Vandenberghe (2010) offered a phenomenological reading of it. Simmel's study of religion is part of his complex and wide-ranging sociology, which is underpinned by a shifting philosophical framework and inconsistent terminology. Thus, his work is not amenable to simple application; rather it requires careful consideration, interpretation and development.

What makes Simmel's insights on religion compelling is the fact that religion is part of a broader thinking on modernity and social relations. This allows an approach for the understanding of religious life, not as separate from the rest of social life, but as a key component of it (cf. chapter four). However, for the purposes of this introductory chapter, it is perhaps necessary to reflect on a more practical question that a reader might, by now, have in mind: how does a thesis on Georg Simmel and sociology of religion sit at the School of Planning and Geography at Cardiff University? The answer lies in a personal journey, which needs to be mentioned to acquaint the reader with my own research perspective. Before venturing into my doctorate, I was a Cardiff city councillor and a policy and public

affairs professional. I wanted to research the involvement in the public sphere of religious communities with a view to developing policy. That never happened as I wandered into a Simmelian universe 'in search for authenticity'.

It all began in the summer of 1995, when I had to decide which university degree to choose. My father wanted me to study law. I was interested in philosophy and religion. 'Law' was his answer. I offered to study political science. 'Law', he replied. So I enrolled at the University of Bologna to read law and left the country two years later. In Britain, I developed a strong commitment to issues of justice and democracy and, in the most roundabout way, I ended up working in politics and public affairs. In 2004, I was elected to Cardiff County Council where I served for two terms. I learned what democracy was about, by fighting with council officers, developers, fellow councillors and constituents. Then, came the general elections of 2005. Conservative politicians, of whichever party, seemed to be using the 'religious card' to appeal to reactionary values, while liberals seemed to regard religion as something one does 'in private', like playing bridge and using pornography. I asked myself why conservative religion had the monopoly of morality. After all, it was my liberal Judaism that called me to politics.

Needless to say that my 'faith' was no settled matter. I agonised over my relationship with God and religious practice. I toiled between the rationalist theology of Maimonides, which goes very well with my Kantian proclivities, the enigmatic "oneness" of the Kabbalah, and my "Father Ted" prayers. I could not fit any denomination. I respected tradition, which I saw as a human quest for a wider horizon by a very select group of human beings, not

always inspiring, let alone inspired. One day, I came clean with God: “I’m more interested in religious people than you.”. A bit harsh, but it is people who make religion live or die, with or without divine assent. It was all clear: I had to research “real people” to find out what was going on out there, and to make it up to God. I pressed wise people I knew whether I should do a Ph.D., including Dr Huw Thomas, of the then School of City and Regional Planning at Cardiff University, and Lord John Alderdice, Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, who did their best to dissuade me from the enterprise.

In 2008, the world was hit by the most severe economic crisis since the stock-market crash of 1929. Against the advice of my future supervisor, Dr Huw Thomas, I decided to leave work and self-fund an M.Sc. in Social Sciences Research Methods to be in a stronger position for applying for doctoral funding the following year. I said goodbye to ever being able to get on the housing ladder and launched into the most boring course available at British universities. I planned my project as a “rigorously scientific” research of three case studies to find out how different faith-based organisations (FBOs) were structured, in what type of “social action” they engaged, how they chose it and carried it out. The fieldwork for the study would have required semi-structured interviews with the leadership and active members, and questionnaires, analysed within the epistemological framework of critical realism.

Something got in the way and I was plunged into a labyrinth of ethnographic meanings (cf. chapter three) and Simmelian relativity (cf. chapter four). Simmel reminded me of my teenage literary love, Luigi Pirandello. Pirandello’s plays and novels are infused with

Lazarus' philosophy, a teacher of Simmel, and echo the same multi-layered and emergent conception of the individual and reality. A contemporary of Simmel, Pirandello left his land of Sicily in 1889 to live in Bonn for two years, where he translated Goethe, who inspired much of Simmel's later writings. In my teenage years, the reading of *The Stranger* (Simmel 1908/1950) in an anthology, aroused my interest. My re-discovery of Simmel came when I read his essays on religion, following a casual mention from an academic in relation to his essay on the metropolis. Once I found Simmel again, I could no longer delay my destiny.

My choice of Georg Simmel was not only for the objective value of his insights on religion, but for an 'elective affinity' that made me gravitate towards him despite his thorny and contradictory thought. However, the re-discovery of a philosophy that has always exercised a strong attraction on me happened after my initial encounter with the evangelical church I had chosen for my Ph.D. research. Distinctive themes echoing Simmel emerged from the brief fieldwork, which I carried out for the completion of the M.Sc. in Social Science Research Methods. My research participants compared faith to music, talked of authenticity and understood belief as trust in God. Simmel seemed the 'perfect match'. The ethnographic research, as outlined in the next section, and Simmel's complex sociology have thus transformed the project completely.

2. Social Capital and Finding Bethlehem

Before my fateful encounter with Simmel, my original proposal for the master's dissertation and for the Ph.D., focussed on the role of religious ideas in the involvement of FBOs in "social action" in the local community, within a public policy framework (Baker, 2006, 2008, 2009, and 2010; Chapman 2008, 2009, and 2011; Dinham 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011, and 2012; Furbey 1999, 2005, 2006, and 2009; Farnell 2001, 2003, and 2009; Graham 2004 and 2008; Livezey 2000a and 2000b; Lund 1995; Smith 1996, 2002, 2003, and 2004). Within this context, social capital seemed like 'a good idea'. Accordingly, social action "bonded" actors in FBOs through communal activities thus fostering community cohesion, but also "bridged" social actors across organisations, thus increasing trust (Putnam et al. 1993; Putnam 1995 and 2000). It took an essay in the second semester of the M.Sc. course to make me ditch social capital as a normative notion with ambitions to be the solution to most ills, and to condemn its 'sibling', spiritual capital, for hollow sentimentalism (Montemaggi 2011).

The fuzzy notion of social action was similarly problematic. Whilst I adopted a sufficiently broad definition, which included all social activities taking place in the church and open to the local community, such as the 'soup run' for homeless people, youth activities, and parent and toddler groups, the notion reinforced a vision of FBOs as service providers and of religion as (Anglican) 'tea and sympathy'. This approach runs the risk of FBOs being interpreted according to government expectations and standards (Dinham 2012), and religion becomes an old-fashioned stereotype of the Church of England, which misunderstands the activities and diversity of religious communities (Ammerman 2005). Religion has too often been essentialised, as a uniform and cohesive system of belief and

practices, thus disregarding the complexity of religious life in the past and the present (Ammerman 2010; McGuire 2008).

My search for religious organisations, as case studies, took an unexpected turn. I approached a Christian evangelical church, which I later named 'Bethlehem', on the basis of a friend's advice. Bethlehem had a good reputation of being active locally. The vision of the church was to provide a sense of place for the local community by creating a welcoming environment and building relationships. I met with the then pastor, Felix, to discuss the activities of the church. He later called me asking for my research proposal, which I thought was odd as I had not decided on the church yet. Felix was preparing to leave the church so he wanted to make sure that everything was in place, not realising what a departing gift a researcher might be for a church in transition. He chose me before I chose the church.

Once acquainted with Bethlehem Church through its documents, I became interested in taking it as a single in-depth study. Bethlehem seemed to have a clear vision of what kind of church and community it wanted to be. One of the church's leaflets, in particular, set out in a detailed and structured manner how theological ideas were linked to action. It captured the vision, the internal organisation, and the relationship with the outside and wrapped it all in the 'sacred canopy' of faith. My supervisor's initial resistance to the choice of an evangelical Christian church disappeared as soon as he saw the leaflet. It was captivating and intriguing, well laid out and coherent. It was perfect, except none of my research participants had ever come across it.

3. Individual Religious Identity

The choice of Bethlehem turned the research into an in-depth case study. It became a slow and intimate search for what a group of people called Christianity. The culture of Bethlehem was crucial in guiding the development of the theory. At the beginning, the empirical data showed the personal identification with religious narratives, from which participants gained meaning in their daily lives (cf. chapter seven). The study of Georg Simmel's sociology and philosophy led to the development of a relational conception of the individual and of social reality (cf. chapter six). The concept of authenticity thus arose from theoretical developments, but also from local narratives of authenticity. Thus, the research always maintained a dialogue between the theory and the data. The resulting concept of authenticity, as a process of identity construction, is laid out in chapter six.

3.1 Research Objective and Research Questions

The objective of the research was to examine the construction of authenticity among a group of committed Christian evangelicals. This required an account of Christian individuality within a sociological framework. The main accounts of religious individuality, as explored in the next chapter, are those of rational choice theory (RCT) and spirituality, both of which lack an adequate social dimension. Consequently, I sought to develop an alternative approach whilst retaining their key strengths, namely: an attention to choice

and individuality. This was achieved by examining critically the sociology and philosophy of Georg Simmel. Simmel's notion of religiosity (*Religiosität*) as an attitude lent itself to a more nuanced understanding of religion that did not rest on set practices and beliefs. Equally, his relational sociology pointed to a potentially more rounded conception of the individual. Nevertheless, Simmel's work is notoriously fragmented and contradictory thus leading to the first major research question of the thesis:

RQ1. Does Simmel propound a coherent framework for understanding religious behaviour?

A preliminary critical reading of Simmel's key works suggested that there was no clear and coherent framework laid out; but that there were concepts which could be interpreted and developed to suit a composite theoretical framework. This work of interpretation and development constitutes a major task accomplished in the thesis. The theoretical contribution is thus the development and systemisation of concepts derived from Simmel's sociology with a view to providing a conception of authenticity that accounts for its relational dimension and for a processual understanding of identity. The conceptions of relational individuality and authenticity serve the purpose of providing an account of contemporary Christian identity, as understood by a small group of Christian evangelicals in Britain. Therefore, the research asked the following questions:

RQ2. How is authenticity understood by participants in the case study?

RQ3. How do the developed theoretical notions help understand the identity of research participants?

The study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of religious identity through *emic* (local) and *etic* (theoretical) categories (cf. chapter three). Ethnographic methods were chosen to enable me to acquire data that would capture the subtle meaning-making of individuals in a small group. This included participant observation, which enabled an appreciation of the social and cultural context of the group, and interviews, which provided a window on the self-understanding of participants. The research has been restricted to a small group in one single church, in a specific time, place and culture. Consequently, the generalisability of the findings is limited. However, the main aim of the study was to develop conceptual notions that may aid the study of religious identity.

3.2 The Contemporary Relevance of Authenticity

On a rainy afternoon of a typical Cardiff spring, my friend Gethin told me of a couple looking at necklaces on display in the gift shop of a church. After a good look, they asked for 'the one with the little man.' I gasped and asked 'Are you serious?' Gethin was serious and unmistakable: the couple did not know who 'the little man' on the cross was supposed to represent. When I told Nicholas, one of the elders at Bethlehem church, he was not surprised. At Bethlehem, quite a few people feel Christians to be a minority despite living in a Christian country. Being a 'nominal' Christian is, for them, an oxymoron. Being a Christian means taking upon oneself to live the Christian life consciously every day. It is a

commitment that goes against the grain of a superficial consumer society (cf. chapter eight). In the eyes of my research participants, Christianity is a distinctive way of life in contemporary multicultural Britain.

The discourse of religious diversity, in the popular and academic imagination, has often neglected to see Christians as part of the multicultural quilt of European society. Contrary to this picture, the present research shows that Christian evangelicals construct their identity as “countercultural,” by which they mean being in opposition to mainstream culture. Christians at Bethlehem have adopted the term ‘countercultural’ to stress that they feel a cultural minority in a multicultural country. The counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s posed a critique to the mainstream culture, seen as white, Western, patriarchal, and, indeed, ‘heteropatriarchal’ (Valdes 1996), with Christianity legitimising the social order by appealing to a divine and moral order¹. It may thus seem paradoxical that the term countercultural is used by white middle-class Christians; yet, Christian authenticity implies, for participants, countering mainstream culture, which does not reflect Christian values.

Thus, the *emic* category of authenticity is not the adoption of spiritual, mystical, or existentialist religion following the demise of organised religion, but the acceptance of the pluralistic framework of the 21st century, which provides the platform for the articulation of Christianity as a distinctive and ‘truer’ way of living. On the other hand, the *etic* category of authenticity is a tool to identify the dynamics of self-understanding, the interpretation of one’s religious tradition and rationale for behaviour. Authenticity, hence, is a process of

¹ Christian movements responded to the ‘counterculture’ in various forms. Examples are the ‘Jesus movement’ (Miller 1997, pp. 33-34) and charismatic Christianity (MacLeod 2007, pp. 137-140).

identity construction through the interpretation of Christian tradition. It emerges from – what is felt as – the displacement, as a result of pluralistic culture, of Christianity as “sacred canopy” (Berger 1967), the overarching religious, cultural, and symbolical framework of society in Britain. Paradoxically, it is pluralism that offers Christian evangelicals the platform to claim a place for Christianity in a highly diverse society.

Following Beckford (2003), pluralism is here understood as the recognition of equal dignity for all individuals and groups as a principle of liberal democracy. In contrast, religious diversity refers to the empirical presence of many religions, but also to the internal diversity within each religion. Pluralism denotes the normative acceptance of the dignity and value of such diversity. As Beckford has argued, religious diversity is “the co-existence of several distinct religious collectivities in a country,” while religious pluralism “is the belief that such *diversity of collectivities* is good, especially if their interrelations are harmonious” (2003, p. 79, emphasis in the original). Religious pluralism values individual autonomy and choice in religious identity and expression. Thus, it “is best considered as a term denoting a normative or ideological view holding that the diversity of religious outlooks and collectivities is, within limits, beneficial and that peaceful coexistence between religious collectivities is desirable” (2003, p. 81).

The present research thus illustrates how Christian evangelicals reformulate Christianity through the prism of authenticity, which encapsulates religious distinctiveness and a universalistic ethics. By developing a theoretical framework for the understanding of authenticity, as a process of identity construction, I aim to highlight the relational and

processual nature of the individual, the relational character of religiosity, and to begin to unravel the relationship between cultural particularism and ethical universalism. The authentic Christian, in the local narrative, is not merely the person who has a relationship with Christ, and follows and enacts Christian teachings, but the one who embodies the aspiration of humanity of living up to universal ethical standards.

In the literature review which follows, the thesis begins by outlining the most influential conceptions of religion. Here, I focus specifically on the notion of religion underpinning much scholarship in sociology of religion, which is steeped into the Protestant model. I present a close critique of rational choice theory and spirituality studies to question their conception of individuality and conclude by providing a window on the flexibility of evangelical Christianity in the past two decades. The chapter cannot be exhaustive of the literature in sociology of religion; rather it aims to provide a critique of the notion of religion underpinning the most significant literature, to question the concept of individuality in 'supply side' theory and spirituality studies, and to bridge the gap between highly theoretical texts and empirical research. Chapter three explains the methodology, the methods employed in the empirical work, and the epistemological approach underlying the research. The epistemological framework is dependent on Georg Simmel's sociology and philosophy, which is explored further in chapter four.

The theoretical contribution of the thesis is outlined in chapters five, six and seven. Chapter five situates the contribution alongside wider philosophical debates over authenticity and ethics. The proposed concept of authenticity does not presuppose ethical content. This is to

avoid endorsing a particular understanding of religion and ethics as superior or holding a privileged ethical standpoint over others. Chapter six sets out the conceptualisation of relational individuality and the concept of authenticity underpinning the research, while chapter seven proposes the notion of sacralisation to account for the attribution of value and legitimacy to religious tradition made by individual religious actors, which defines the boundaries of authenticity. The chapter also identifies the ethics of compassion that functions as an overarching discourse among participants at Bethlehem and indicates how ethics is part of one's cultural identity.

Chapters eight, nine and ten present an analysis of the data through the theoretical concepts espoused in the previous chapters. Chapter eight explores the culture of Bethlehem and identifies the shift in emphasis 'from doctrine to authenticity', while chapter nine explores what authenticity means in relation to individual identity. Chapter ten reflects on the ethical boundaries of being a Christian and thus of authenticity, and sheds light onto the ethics of compassion as a form of ethics influencing the making of community and the interpretation of Christianity. Finally, chapter eleven brings the thesis to a close by considering the relationship between the theory and the data, the wider significance of the research and offers a personal reflection on the process of empirical research and theoretical construction in the study of religion.

Chapter Two

Modern Religion and the Individual

1. Introduction

The objective of the present research is to develop a theoretical framework for a better understanding of individual religious identity, through the notion of authenticity and to apply it to the narratives and practices of contemporary Christians in an evangelical church. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the assumptions regarding the concepts of religion and modernity underpinning the most dominant literature in sociology of religion. These are broad concepts, of which the present critique can only treat the most significant aspects. I thus concentrate on Max Weber's notion of the 'disenchantment of modernity', which has been central to the most dominant theory of religion, secularisation, but also to its responses, such as 'supply side' theory and spirituality studies. Weber's disenchantment is at the core of sociological understandings of modernisation.

Secularisation theories, reviewed in section two, have rested on Weber's idea of disenchantment, as the process of intellectualisation of knowledge giving rise to instrumental reason (cf. sections two and three). Section four critiques the assumption central to the notion of disenchantment of a 'pre-modern world' as a uniform society of God-believing people subscribing to common values. This notion contributes to the construction of religion according to a Christian Protestant model of propositional belief and formal organisation, which has underpinned much of the dominant scholarship in the discipline. The conception of modernity and of religion is thus filtered through a lack of historicity, which ascribes to the Protestant Reformation the principal role of breaking free from the magic pre-modern world.

This is evident in Charles Taylor's work on religion (2002 and 2007). In his previous philosophical work, Taylor (1989) emphasises the 'inward turn' of the Protestant Reformation as the intellectual origin of modernity. Yet, he seemingly disregards previous instances of rationalisation, differentiation, and individualisation. He also adopts a normative approach judging negatively the loss of – what he calls – the pre-modern "cosmic-religious embedding" (Taylor 2010, p. 23) that leaves the modern "self" detached from communities of meaning and value (cf. chapter five). This normative account of individualisation can be found in the apprehension of classical sociological theory at – what seemed to be – the inevitable atomism and fragmentation of society, which is at the root of sociological thinking (cf. section four). This concept of rationalised and individualised modernity is also shared by 'supply side' theory of religion, which is based on rational choice theory, and by spirituality studies, where, however, individual autonomy is largely

positive and considered to be the prominent element of contemporary religious and spiritual forms.

However, whilst individual autonomy lies at the foundation of both ‘supply side’ theory and spirituality, the individual is conceptualised differently in each account. Thus, sections five and six analyse in depth ‘supply-side’ theory and spirituality studies, which are the two most influential frameworks for the understanding of individual religiosity. A close examination, rather than a simple review, serves the purpose of laying the ground to construct a fully relational account of individuality (cf. chapter six), which is in contrast with the individual’s instrumental rationality underpinning ‘supply-side’ theory and the normative appreciation of individual autonomy by much of the spirituality scholarship and by theories of authenticity, including that of Taylor (cf. chapter five).

Spirituality studies have perhaps been at the forefront of pointing to the increasing relevance of the notion of authenticity. Authenticity, however, is not confined to New Age spiritual practitioners, but is present in mainstream religion, including evangelical Christianity. Thus, section seven delves into the great innovation, diversity and fluidity of evangelical Christianity. Evangelicals have responded to the social and cultural shifts of the past fifty years by adapting but also by challenging social change. The individualistic Protestantism of evangelicals, their suspicion of authority and relative lack of ritualism, especially by comparison with the Orthodox or Catholic Churches, allowed them a particular sensitivity to the anti-authoritarian individualism of the 1960s and after. This is

reflected in the increased lay involvement, flexible structures and the emphasis on acceptance Miller (1997) identified in – what he termed – ‘new paradigm churches’.

Section seven concludes with a brief note on the literature on congregations and faith-based organisations (FBOs) to highlight current trends in interpreting ‘faith’ as belief in the supernatural and as a psychological motivator. This approach neglects the social embeddedness of the individual and how social action is constructed. The action of FBOs is also often assumed to be a positive contribution, which neglects the negative action in which religious groups are sometimes involved. This is a serious flaw in the understanding of the relationship between religion and ethics, and the different interpretations and, indeed, constructions of ethics (cf. chapter seven).

The literature surveyed is predominantly American and British. This is partly due to the dominance of Anglo-American literature in the field, but also to the geographical and cultural location of the case study employed in this research: a Christian evangelical church in the UK. The chapter, as mentioned, provides an overview of the most significant literature, together with an examination of rational choice theory, underpinning ‘supply side theory’, and of the normative hues in Heelas’ spirituality studies to contest current notions of individuality and authenticity. A critique of influential theories on authenticity is provided in chapter five as an introduction to the theoretical framework presented in chapters six and seven. Scholarship relevant to Simmel’s sociology is thus present in chapters four, five, six and seven. The relevant literature is employed as an aid to the

exploration of Simmelian notions of the individual and religiosity with a view to developing them for the interpretation of current religious behaviour.

2. Theories of Secularisation

Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) has been one of the most influential texts laying out a theory of secularisation. Berger understood religion as an agent of legitimation: religion sustained the social construction of the knowledge of reality by providing an overarching narrative. It was Protestantism that, for Berger, undermined the legitimising role of religion by stressing individualistic and rational elements of religious life. This led to a differentiation between sacred and secular spheres accentuated by the differentiation of society brought about by industrialisation. The resulting secularisation eroded religion's power to legitimise social structures. In turn, the secularisation of society and culture would lead to the secularisation of consciousness. In other words, individuals would now no longer look at the world through religious interpretations (Berger 1967, p. 108), but as individuals free to choose the framework they found more consonant with their perspective.

According to Berger, secularisation "has resulted in a widespread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of reality" (Berger 1967, p. 127). The diversity of worldviews, which Berger calls pluralism, has thus undermined the solidity of

traditional religious narratives. This is further compounded by the now voluntary nature of religious allegiance. The increased individualisation of society weakens the dominance and authority of religious tradition, which now needs to be “*marketed*” (Berger 1967, p. 138, emphasis in the original). In an increasingly diverse religious landscape, religious groups must organise to “woo a population of consumers, in competition with other groups having the same purpose” (Berger 1967, p. 138). The greater individualisation of society relegates religious “reality” to the private sphere thus turning it into a subjective concern. Consequently, the reality of religion “is apprehended as being rooted within the consciousness of the individual” (Berger 1967, p. 152), rather as an external meaning-system shared with others.

Berger’s contribution was the stepping stone for the paradigmatic status of secularisation in sociology of religion. He later abandoned secularisation and acknowledged that the multiplicity of worldviews does not necessarily impede the coexistence of a religion’s truth with another (Berger 1999). However, in his rejection of secularisation, Berger still holds on to the idea of modernisation. For him, “modernisation has had some secularising effects, more in some places than in others”, but “it has also provoked powerful movements of counter-secularisation. Also secularisation on the societal level is not necessarily linked to secularisation on the level of individual consciousness.” (Berger 1999, p. 3). Berger sees in the thriving of ‘orthodox’ religion, especially Pentecostalism, a sign of counter-secularisation which ensures survival of religion, although he also predicts that ‘strict’ religions will adapt eventually.

Berger's theory and other secularisation theories rest on a concept of modernity, which is largely characterised by the processes of individualisation, rationalisation, and differentiation. Individualisation identifies the rise in individual autonomy due to, at least in part, the differentiation of society in separate spheres, which results in the loss of pre-modern community (*Gemeinschaft*) in favour of a more contractual society (*Gesellschaft*). Modern differentiated society is seen as dominated by instrumental rationality as a result of rationalisation. This vision is heavily indebted to Max Weber's notion of the "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*) of the world, better translated as demystification. For Weber "the process of intellectualization", which had been "undergoing for thousands of years", was the main cause of the retreat of religion into the realm of the irrational (Weber 1919/1970, p. 138).

The unabated advance in knowledge had rationalised the world and de-mystified it. The world could be explained by science and it was, hence, an object of discovery and no longer the physical creation of God, whose understanding uncovered God's will in the world. Weber thought that it was Protestant ideas that spurred rationalisation by stressing the rational and individualistic relationship with the divine. Consequently, religious explanations for the meaning of the world lost their authority. Weber's idea provided an interpretation of modernity by stressing an incommensurable distance with a fictitious 'pre-modern world' (cf. section 4). Tschannen (1991), in his systemisation of secularisation theories, stressed the importance of differentiation, rationalisation, and worldliness. He did not refer to individualisation specifically, although, in many cases, it is an outcome of the wider process of modernity.

Differentiation engenders a separation between the religious and secular sphere with churches losing control over social functions. This, for Luckmann (1967), leads religion to lose influence over other spheres of life and to become privatised. Rationalisation is the dominance of instrumental rationality, while worldliness is understood by Berger (1967) as the retreat of the sacred from everyday life; and a distance from the transcendent realm by Luckmann (1990). Other important features, which Tschannen attributes to the theories of Berger, Luckman and Wilson, are autonomisation, the process whereby society gains autonomy in its functioning from religion; the generalisation of religion, which “permeates the world ‘under’ secular appearances” (Tschannen 1991, p. 408); and the pluralisation of religious institutions becoming more worldly and competing with one another (Tschannen 1991, p. 409).

Most secularisation theorists see the process of rationalisation as a consequence of the Protestant Reformation. Accordingly, the pre-modern ‘enchanted’ traditional community (*Gemeinschaft*) gives way to the modern ‘disenchanted’ association (*Gesellschaft*) through the loss of monopoly over the institution of society. Following Weber, Steve Bruce (1999) has claimed that the Reformation demystified the world by enabling the individual to interpret Scriptures without the intermediary of the clergy thus weakening the power of the Church to have control over individuals’ practices and beliefs. Bryan Wilson’s interpretation of secularisation rested upon the process of differentiation that caused the institutions of society to grow apart and religious institutions to lose their control of and access to social activities (1966, p. 250). Similarly, David Martin understands secularisation as dependent on social differentiation, but has stressed the role of Christian language.

Accordingly, social differentiation “erodes the links between Christian language and emerging secular languages, for example, those of science and politics, and breaks down the comprehensive institutional coverage once provided by the Church. The theological mode ceases to provide the overarching frame.” (Martin 2005, p. 187).

Secularisation has been restricted to a largely European phenomenon, which “is extrinsic rather than intrinsic to the modernising process per se” (Davie 2002, p. 161), and reframed as non-linear (Yamane 1997). In *Public religions in the modern world*, José Casanova (1994) considered differentiation inevitable, but not so privatisation and the disappearance of religion. He argued that religion underwent a process of “deprivatization”, term which Casanova uses polemically against secularisation theories and liberal political theories that “prescribe the privatization of religion as a modern structural trend necessary to safeguard modern liberties and differentiated structures” (Casanova 1994, p. 220), but also in relation to the “move or relocation of religion” (Casanova 1994, p. 221).

Casanova adduces, as evidence of this process of “deprivatization”, the religious dimension of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the role played by of the Catholic Church in the processes of democratisation in Spain, Poland and Brazil, the development of liberation theology in Latin America, and the rise of Protestant fundamentalism in US politics. Beckford (2010b, p. 123) has critiqued this thesis for assuming that public forms of religion cannot coexist with continuing privatisation and for neglecting the role of governments and states in using religion for their own purposes. Over the years, Casanova has come to understand religion

through the process of globalisation, which makes possible the coexistence of different forms of religion (Casanova 2011).

In short, secularisation theories do not prophesise the 'end' of religion, but the decline of institutionalised forms of religion and of the power of religious authorities (Chaves 1994) in a more differentiated society, where the individual can choose how to express their religiosity. Modernity, in most accounts of secularisation, is thus the fundamental interpretive tool employed in the study of religion. Nevertheless, it still seems to be understood through the lens of Weber's disenchantment, which too often leads to the conception of a uniform undifferentiated and irrational pre-modern world. Gorski's (2000) historical reflection on secularisation provides a more nuanced understanding of the twin processes of differentiation and de-differentiation.

"In the West, it is argued, Medieval unity was undermined by the Reformation split, which in turn gave rise to modern pluralism. This schema is oversimplified, because the differentiation of the three major churches (Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic) during the Reformation era went hand-in-hand with a de-differentiation among church, state, and society at the territorial level." (Gorski 2000, p. 143)

Building on historical scholarship, according to which medieval religiosity is one of 'immanence' whilst early-modern religiosity is one of 'transcendence', Gorski understands the Reformation as a process of "religious rationalization" seeking to replace a religiosity

that was “magical, ritual, and communal” with one that was “ethical, intellectual, and individual” (Gorski 2000, p. 148). Accordingly, ‘magical religiosity’, for Gorski, is a characteristic of believers who seek out divine favour or intervention through formulas or rituals. This is contrasted with ‘ethical religiosity’, in which believers call for divine favour or intervention “by means of proper conduct or individual supplication”. ‘Ritual religiosity’ “centers around the performance and repetition of certain commemorative or propitiatory acts (usually by a priestly class)”, whilst ‘intellectual religiosity’ affirms “religious truths or teachings”. Finally, the rituals and practices of ‘communalistic religiosity’ are in pursuit of “welfare – material and spiritual – of the given social community (*Gemeinschaft*), understood here to comprise both the living and the dead”, in contrast with the rituals and practices of ‘individualistic religiosity’, which are “oriented primarily toward the welfare of the individual believer and, more generally, of the community of the living” (Gorski 2000, pp. 148-149). These distinctions, however, suggest temporal transformations of religiosity rather than the co-presence of all in different sections of the population.

From this brief overview of the secularisation debate, transpires the overwhelmingly Anglo-American perspective of the literature betraying perhaps the influence of Protestant Christianity in the underlying notion of religion. Scholars have conceptualised religion in the image of Protestantism, as critiqued consistently by prominent anthropologists, such as Rodney Needham (1972) and Talal Asad (1993). Accordingly, religion is essentialised as a uniform and cohesive system of belief and practices, thus disregarding the complexity of religious life in the past and the present (Ammerman 2010; McGuire 2008). Religion, in the secularisation theories’ paradigm, is reduced to exclusive truth claims, which may or may

not be falsified by science or undermined by other religions. Belief is restricted to the adherence to official doctrine, regardless of whether this reflects the experience of believers, not only in contemporary society, but also in the mythical 'pre-modern world'.

The underlying assumption of what constitutes religion seems to be propositional belief in the supernatural within a highly organised and hierarchical institution. It is not self-evident why religion can only be made of beliefs, practices and rituals belonging to an established tradition and legitimised by religious authorities thus disregarding 'informal' practices and beliefs and the role played by individual actors in legitimising both formal and informal beliefs and customs (cf. chapter seven). This well-ordered understanding of religion constructs a mythical past and an inadequate present. It conjures an imaginary 'Age of Faith', when religion dominated society and the world was understood according to religious ideas, which was superseded by the 'Age of Reason'. The process of rationalisation, so fundamental to secularisation, is interpreted with more than a tinge of Tylor's intellectualism and Fraser's evolutionary thought. Thus religion is constructed as the myths of the ancients explaining the world that are surpassed with the advance of modern science.

In a rather entertaining article, Stark (1999) runs through historical studies showing how little people knew about religion in the past and how little they cared, including the clergy. Churches were often used to stage markets and dances. Even during the Sunday service, behaviour was not the most respectful and pious. It included jostling for pews, spitting, farting, telling of jokes and the occasional letting off of guns (Thomas, cited in Stark 1999, p.

258). Further, historical research shows a secular (*laïc*) culture of intellectuals in the middle ages (Imbach 1996). The lack of historicity behind the construction of the pre-modern world is explored in section four. The next section clarifies Max Weber's notion of disenchantment that is reliant on a unified pre-modern world and reflects on its historical background.

3. The Disenchantment of Modernity

Theories of secularisation, as mentioned, are often wrapped in the narrative of disenchantment. A fundamental flaw of the narrative is taking Weber's normative and epistemological notion in a decontextualised and deterministic fashion. Weber's 'demystification' (*Entzauberung*), reflected primarily an epistemological concern (Swatos and Christiano 1999). He wrote at a time of unshakable faith in scientific and technological progress, which was dominated by instrumental reason. He thus feared that instrumental reason had become the only authority legitimising what was acceptable knowledge. Weber did not share the optimism of science and progress of philosophical Positivism; for him, rationalisation was not liberating but imprisoning. He lamented the disenchantment of reality, where myth is stripped away to leave room for rationality.

Weber thought that knowledge of the world was on a linear and progressive path of intellectualisation. He imputed intellectualisation and rationalisation to the indirect

influence of Protestantism and Puritanism, which shifted the focus from the knowledge of nature, to be found among philosophers, to the study of God's "works" in the "exact sciences" (Weber 1919/1970, p. 142). Intellectualisation and rationalisation identify the process whereby magical knowledge is overcome and reason is no longer unified ushering in differentiated spheres of knowledge. Thus, religious meaning lost its authority and science became a rival to religion. Intellectualisation and rationalisation were the paradoxical outcome of the "routinisation" of religious asceticism. Accordingly, the methodical practices and a structured organisation, which aimed to protect specific ideas, ended up overturning the very same ideas. The process is thus paradoxical. For Weber, as Symonds and Pudsey (2008, p. 237) argue, "fundamental values or ends are undermined, lost or reversed in the very pursuit of those values or ends".

The 'ethic' of religion remained alive but in opposition to the scientific understanding of a now objectified world (Weber 1919/1970, pp. 142-143). Religion came to be seen as the irrational human sentiment fighting against enlightened scientific rationality.

"The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the

spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualization means" (Weber 1919/1970, p. 139).

This process, as Weber notes, has been central to the development of culture throughout history; yet Weber contrasts modernity with pre-modern times in terms of the changed conception of truth. He argues that whilst the truth of science, in the past, was guided by the search for a deeper transcendental truth, be it 'true being' in Plato, 'true art and nature' in Leonardo, or 'God' in Protestantism, in modern times, the truth of science serves only itself. Truth is lost in the self-justifying logic of modern science. Accordingly, science comes to be seen as "free from presuppositions" (Weber 1919/1970, p. 143), in the sense that it has no ulterior motives; it is "value-free because it disregards all values in order to concentrate on the world of pure things and to constitute it as a theoretically closed object-domain" (Vandenberghe 1999a, p. 61). Yet, the work of science is based on fundamental presuppositions that define, and thus confine, science.

"All scientific work presupposes that the rules of logic and method are valid ... Science further presupposes that what is yielded by scientific work is important in the sense that it is 'worth being known'. In this, obviously, are contained all our problems. For this presupposition cannot be proved by scientific means. It can only be interpreted with reference to its ultimate meaning, which we must reject or accept according to our ultimate position towards life" (Weber 1919/1970, p. 143).

The impersonality of the economy rationalises relationships economically. The rationalised economy and the rationalised bureaucratic state are characterised by depersonalisation which eschews morality (Symonds and Pudsey 2006). Instrumental rationality brings no freedom. Reason is itself “crushed by the forces of its own creation, the materialistic determinism of capitalism” (Mackinnon 2001, p. 330).

“The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations” (Weber 1919/1970, p. 155).

Weber’s notion of disenchantment has coloured much of the scholarship in sociology of religion; yet, in secularisation theories, it has been interpreted as the reason for the demise of religion, or of religious authority. Weber, like many other classical sociologists, expressed concerns regarding the unabated rise of instrumental reason. This ought to be read in its historical context. Nineteenth century’s faith in progress and the machine was accompanied by angst. Before Weber, Tönnies (1887/1963) had lamented the differentiation of human association in his dichotomy between the “real and organic life” of *Gemeinschaft*, and the “imaginary and mechanical structure” of *Gesellschaft* (1887/1963, p. 33). For Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* coexist, but the latter is the fruit of urban culture. Thus, *Gesellschaft* is proper of the modern metropolis, subject to a constant process of urbanisation and instrumental exchange between people.

The natural will (*Wesenwille*) of *Gemeinschaft* is contrasted with the rational will (*Kürwille*) of *Gesellschaft* (1887/1963, p. 103). The rationality of contractual relations is instrumental. Thus, “every person strives for that which is to his own advantage and he affirms the actions of others only in so far as and as long as they can further his interest” (Tönnies 1887/1963, p. 77). In a similar vein, Georg Simmel talked of a blasé attitude (*Blasiertheit*) of the metropolis (Simmel 1908/1950), and of the calculatory mentality of the money economy (Simmel 1907/2004). The core characteristic of the mentality, or spiritual life, (*Geistesleben*) of the metropolis is fragmentation. Modernity thus encapsulates the sense of transitory and detached relationships of urbanised society. The modernity, ushered in by industrialised capitalism and 19th century urbanisation, carries the ‘sensation’ of a society in constant flux.

The boom of the 1850s (Hobsbawm 1987, pp. 44-45) was followed by spectacular growth between 1870 and 1890 (Hobsbawm 1987, p. 35), and yet intellectuals of the time had a sense of general economic and social malaise (Hobsbawm 1987, p. 36). Industrialised capitalism caused Europe and America to leap into the unknown of a new world. Between the mid-18th and mid-19th centuries, the northwest of Europe defeated epidemics and famine. As a result, whilst in 1810 life expectancy was below 40 years of age, it reached nearly 60 years by 1939 (Vallin 2006, p. 46). The 19th century saw the most profound economic and social changes in centuries from which fundamental differences between the ‘West’ and the rest of the world originated. Industrial capitalism lifted the ‘West’ from

poverty and early death. It gave life to a mass society, which became more literate, prosperous and democratic through economic development and political strife.

Modern capitalism inserted people within a system of constant transformation (Marx 1883/1976) that was not confined to the economy but touched every aspect of life. The primary *locus*, but also the 'product' of modernity, was the city. Under the thrust of industrialisation, cities sprang and grew exponentially. Impersonality and anonymity made the city the place where the individual was free but detached from – what were seen as – familiar bonds. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the great unfolding of the industrial revolution provoked almost a sense of nausea for its extreme heights and horrendous lows. Nevertheless, the melancholic nostalgia of the pioneers of sociology has too often been taken normatively and has led many contemporary sociologists to bemoan the loss of meaning and community associated with modern atomisation. Accordingly, the solitary modern individual is left drowning in the fragmented world of modernity, not to mention the abyss of post-modernity. Modernity has turned the 'West' into a society of individuals, who have been 'bowling alone' (Putnam 2000) for over a hundred years.

4. The Reformation and the Modern 'Self'

The previous section reflected on Weber's notion of disenchantment and its historical context. The narrative of disenchantment, as mentioned, is essential to the interpretation of

modernity as the threefold process of rationalisation, differentiation and individualisation. Following Weber, modernity is often associated with the Protestant Reformation, which initiated the process of rationalisation. In contrast, historians have begun to revise the notion of enchantment and to employ it as a tool revealing the construction of legitimate knowledge by an elite, rather than a loss of a pre-modern worldview (Saler 2006). The construction of a uniform pre-modern world undermines a proper understanding of modernity and, therefore, of contemporary religion. This is evident in Charles Taylor's work, which has been greatly influential in a wide range of disciplines. Taylor's assumptions are here contested to form the basis of my argument for an understanding of authenticity, as a process of identity construction, rather than an ethical aspiration, as formulated by Taylor.

Charles Taylor understands the disenchantment of modernity as the rejection of the pre-modern "cosmic-religious embedding" (2010, p. 32). In his monumental opus *A Secular Age* (2007), Taylor argues that modernity has brought a move from belief in God to belief in the self. Taylor proposes an understanding of modernity through shifts in culture, rather than 'acultural' accounts, by which he means materialistic explanations (Taylor 1995). Taylor's linear narration of the philosophical development of modernity neglects historical and sociological evidence. It is an effort in *eisegesis* rather than *exegesis*. Instead of providing a hermeneutical account of past philosophical thought, Taylor seems to read his idea of modernity into their texts. By excising any materialistic consideration, he decontextualises philosophical writings and constructs a narrative to suit his image of the pre-modern

world, modernity and contemporary society thus offering us no tool to understand social reality.

For the purposes of this chapter, I want to focus on three main concerns that are directly relevant to the conception of religion in contemporary times: Taylor's conception of the pre-modern world; the democratisation of ethics; and the inward turn, which Taylor imputes to the Reformation. In the first instance, Taylor claims that, in the West, there has been a movement "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others" (Taylor 2007, p. 3). It follows that secularism, for Taylor, is the "rejection of cosmic-religious embedding" (2010, p. 32). Taylor's 'God' is clearly the Protestant Christian personal God and 'belief' is Protestant belief in the transcendent supernatural. Thus, in this version of secularisation, all forms of religion that preceded modernity are conflated with belief in the theistic God.

Taylor's assertion that Western society has moved from a culture of 'belief in God' to one where it is just an option, is simply flawed historically. Taylor's method of grounding his theory on the writings of philosophers and thus of an elite disregards the lived reality of people in the past. The everyday religion of people was not the diligent application of the ideal religion of theologians and clergymen. Indeed, as mentioned previously, even during the middle ages there was a 'secular' (*laïc*) culture among intellectuals. Most importantly, religion has changed forms, function and status throughout history. The construction of different paradigms for the understanding of humanity vis-à-vis nature and the

supernatural was mirrored necessarily by very different constructions of religion through the ages. In other words, the terms 'god' and 'religion' have a completely different meaning in Roman antiquity, medieval Europe, early and late modern Europe, and contemporary Europe.

Taking as an example ancient Rome, religion was pervasive of society but not as personal belief in God; rather it was a communal civic endeavour. Roman 'public religion' was constituted by norms and customs codified by practice. It was thus based on orthopraxis (Ando 2008; Scheid 2003). Roman rituals aimed at the wellbeing of the civic and political community, rather than a personal relationship with the deity. The "emperors' identification with gods", for instance, "did not constitute in itself a way or means of deification" (Camia and Kantiréa 2010, p 378). On the contrary the "imperial cult was born of the need of the subjects to define the place of their lord in a hierarchical system of values, and in this sense, it represented none other than the highest level in the scale of honours" (Camia and Kantiréa 2010, p. 381).

This example serves to challenge not only a uniform view of the 'pre-modern world', but also of rationalisation. Weber, himself, considered ancient Rome an example of rationalisation (Weber 1922/1965, p. 12), which is supported by more recent research (Keane 1984, p. 40; Kennedy 2004, p. 1046). For Weber, the legal reasoning of Roman jurists was an example of "formal rationality", which anticipated the modern legal system².

² Roman law was in use in most European countries as *Ius Commune* until the Napoleonic Code (1804) in France and the Civil Code (1900) in Germany (Stein 1999).

Therefore, rationalisation and differentiation, perhaps, ought to be understood as recurring processes or, at least, in relation to historical examples. Consequently, Taylor's second point of ethical democratisation, as a consequence of rationalisation, also needs to be disputed.

Taylor argues that the reformation brought ethical concerns to a much wider population than the clergy with the effect of democratising ethics. Taylor imputes this moralisation to Protestant rationalisation, which frees (instrumental) reason from a theological framework. Consequently, the modern "self" is "buffered" from traditional authorities (Taylor 2007, pp. 37-38), although it is not clear whether this "buffered self" is "buffered" from all authorities except its own self. Again, Taylor discounts pre-modern capitalist processes of differentiation and democratisation, due to his disregard for the historical process of urbanisation and technological changes, such as the printing press. For instance, the urban revolution of the Italian *comuni* of the XI and XII centuries and the invention of credit in Italian city-states laid the foundation for modern capitalism (Cipolla 1976/1997). Indeed, the growth of urban society is accompanied by the growth of schools and literacy (Cipolla 1969, p. 45), which were detached from religious authorities thus challenging their monopoly of power.

"Between the sixth and the eleventh centuries the Church had acquired a virtual monopoly on literacy and education. ... But there is no doubt that beginning with the eleventh century, especially in those areas where commercial life grew more intensively, the Church lost its monopoly as new arrangements and new

institutions slowly developed to cope with new situations and needs” (Cipolla 1969, p. 43)

The lack of a historical, economic and political perspective credits the Reformation with a revolutionary power able to transform society completely and initiate a new ‘era’. The ascendancy of the Protestant Reformation on past and present scholars of religion seems to have prevented a historical and multidimensional account, not only of religion, but also of modernity. Thus, the ‘inward turn’, operated single-handedly by the Reformation, has given us the modern “buffered self”, seen by Taylor as detached from community and a wider moral horizon. The solipsistic view of the modern individual glosses over the different phases and aspects of individualisation. The Reformation stressed the more intimate conception of the self, inherited from Cicero’s humanism (Davies 1997) and reflected in Augustine, as argued by Taylor (1989). However, this is not the only example of a ‘reflexive’ individuality. Simmel, for instance, considered the Italian Renaissance of the early fourteenth century as the origin of modern individuality for loosening the ties of the middle ages (Simmel 1971, p. 217).

The Italian Renaissance is often seen as the cultural movement when individuality is intensified and when notions of the ‘self’ become more accentuated. The ideas of “self-consciousness, self-expression, self-presentation and self-fashioning” (Burke 1997, p. 18) are but some elements of Renaissance subjectivity that will be expanded by industrialised modernity. Self-knowledge, the presentation of the self to others, sincerity, and even a fragmented self that are identified as so central to the ‘subjective turn’ (Taylor 1989) were

already present in Renaissance Italy. The self-reflexive sensibility, at that time, was thus not typically Puritan, but more a reflection of a re-discovery of ancient culture and, arguably, of the role of the city offering “alternative ways of life” and encouraging “a sense of individual choice” (Burke 1997, p. 22). The self, ‘between Petrarch and Descartes’, became “both more unified than before and more sharply distinguished from the outside world of family and community” (Burke 1997, p. 27). The “new discourse stressed self-reflection and self-control” and “lay the basis for modern subjective sensibility” (Smith 1997, p. 57)

The narrow interpretation of modernity according to the ‘doctrine’ of the rationalisation operated by the Protestant Reformation fails to appreciate individualisation throughout time, such as in antiquity (Stroumsa 2012) and early modernity (Burke 1997). Undoubtedly individuality received a significant boost under the thrust of industrialised modernity. However, I believe the role of the great economic and political transformations of the 18th and 19th centuries has been neglected in favour of a mythical image of the Reformation as the origin and agent of change. This simplistic account of modernity fails to explore the influence of distinctive features of Protestantism, such as the importance ascribed to sobriety, sincerity, and introspection, as developed in the cultural milieu of industrialised modernity, including in its reaction in the Romantic Movement.

Those traits, nourished by Romantic philosophy and poetry, have shaped a particular understanding of individuality and authenticity, which has remained a reference point

for those escaping economic and cultural upheavals. Lynch detects in the spiritual milieu the “post-Reformation turn to the self” and “the Romantic turn to nature” (Lynch 2007, p. 11), discussed in section six. In contrast, the more utilitarian side of modernity marks “supply-side” theory, based on rational choice theory and is advocated mostly by American scholars. The next section develops a close analysis of rational choice theory to shed light on the underpinning construction of individuality, which is countered by the relational account I propose in chapter six.

5. A Critique of Rational Choice Theory

“Supply-side” theory developed within the framework of rational choice theory (RCT), which outlines a neat and simple conception of the basic rationale and process of decision-making that human beings apply in their daily lives. The framework seemingly provides a way to understand behaviour, in particular organisational behaviour, by providing a model of individual decision-making. Notwithstanding fundamental critiques (Bruce 1993; Demerath 1995; Ellison 1995; Boudon 1998; Chaves 1995; Spickard 1998; Sharot 2002), rational choice theory seems to have conquered the hearts and minds of a sizeable and influential part of academia spreading like a virus across disciplines. Rational choice theory is predicated on actors choosing freely an optimal course of action to ‘maximise’ their gain. The essential element of ‘maximising behaviour’ imputes to actors the fundamental rationale of self-interest. The actor chooses between a set of alternatives. Lack of

information does not invalidate the model as “an actor will act on the basis of his or her *beliefs* about possible action opportunities and their effects” (Hedström and Swedberg 1996, p. 128, emphasis in the original).

The theory is, therefore, aimed at predicting trends resulting from the choices made by individuals. One of the most influential formulations of this theory is Iannaccone’s notion of ‘religious capital’ (Iannaccone 1990). Following Gary Becker’s use of rational choice theory (1976) Iannaccone proposes religious capital as the “familiarity with a religion’s doctrines, rituals, traditions, and members”, which, in turn, “enhances the satisfaction one receives from participation in that religion and so increases the likelihood and probable level of one’s religious participation.” (Iannaccone 1990, p. 299). ‘Religious capital’ is thus accumulation of familiarity, knowledge and relationships within the religious sphere. The core characteristic of religious capital is the benefit, or perceived benefit, the agent receives by participating in religious activity. The agent is thus willing to invest time and money to pursue religious activity and increase their religious capital. This affirmation is problematic for it excludes negative experiences of one’s religious background and how these affect one’s religious identity or rejection of religion.

Iannaccone (1995a, p. 85) accepts that RCT takes a utilitarian approach and is, therefore, “unrealistic” for it disregards the complexity of human culture; yet he fails to acknowledge the dynamics of value formation, both at the individual and communal level. Religious capital has been considered a “paradigm shift” (Warner 1993, p. 1044; Finke and Stark 2003, p. 96), mostly due to the rising dominance of rational choice theory. Rational choice

theory has duly highlighted the importance of individual religiosity and choice. The person is not merely part of a religious group but an agent choosing freely. However, its fundamental assumptions of 'instrumental rationality' as the principal drive in decision-making cripple the theory. According to rational choice theorists, individuals make 'rational' choices by pursuing what is in their own 'self-interest' and differences in values and cultures only count as variables.

Thus, what an individual values is a mere preference which is to be pursued as a goal within a framework dominated by self-interest. Satz and Ferejohn (1994) explain that profit maximisation is "an externally derived theory of interests" (1994, p. 87), which supplements RCT. Kiser and Hechter (1998), drawing on Weber (1922/1965), recognise that there are non-instrumental orientations, such as "value-oriented action", "emotional action" and, also, habitual action. However, when faced with lack of evidence on the action orientation, the assumption is that "actors are instrumentally oriented. Instrumental action is least ambiguous and therefore most understandable to the analyst, who may not share an emic perspective with her subjects" (1998, p. 801). The rationale of instrumentality is assumed to be present in all human beings.

There are several problems with these conceptions of choice, instrumentality, and self-interest. In reference to choice, this is reduced to outcome-driven behaviour, which dismisses any other concern of the actor, any dynamic of the group, and any environmental and circumstantial influence. It is a mechanical conception of choice, which is reduced to the outcome of a calculation. Social relations seem to count only as a cultural reference

impinging on one's preferences, rather than a shaping of the individual. In reference to instrumentality, rational choice theorists claim that instrumental actions are based on the assumption of the shared "pursuit of wealth, power, and prestige" (1998, p. 802). However, "wealth, power, and prestige" are not goals, but values.

Consequently, rational choice theorists are not as 'instrumentalist' as they think they are; rather they are disingenuous about the underlying values informing the theory. The self-interest assumed by RCT is not informed by a theory of value. Therefore, it is difficult to understand how actors seek to maximise profit when profit does not equate with money. Further, rational choice theorists, by isolating individuals, prevent any reflection on what can be deemed 'efficient' or 'rational'. Even a consideration of costs and benefits requires an explanation as to what the agent considers a cost and a benefit and how these are balanced. Indeed, actors may choose very destructive and 'irrational' behaviour in order to pursue 'wealth, power and prestige'.

More significantly, the logic of economic self-interest, here implied, is generalised to all and in all circumstances, given the claims rational choice theorists make to explain the most diverse behaviour in the most disparate situations (Hechter and Kanazawa 1997). Money might make the world go round, but the logic of economic self-interest is but one of many and is not necessarily the dominant logic in human behaviour. It is thus arbitrary to assume that self-interest is the most fundamental motivation in all human beings. Arguably, an actor's pursuit of wealth, power and prestige could be determined by a deep-seated need for love and longing for human relationships, meaning and purpose in life. Whilst it is

difficult and often impossible to establish the underlying motivation for the pursuit of wealth, it is likely to impact on the actors' choices much more than an external and mechanical understanding of rationality.

This is not to dismiss self-interest as a powerful orientation in action; rather it is to appreciate that instrumental action is embedded within wider systems of meaning and that social relations shape and inform decision-making. For instance, the sense of belonging to a group engenders a rationale that affects one's interaction with members of the group and one's identity. Further, rational choice theory is heavily biased towards an assumption of self-interest. This is partly mitigated by the consideration of the context of the action. However, an adequate understanding of the societal, cultural and psychological constraints is prevented by a very narrow conception of rationality. One's identity is not irrational, neither are one's feelings, but these construct their own logic making the RCT approach hollow.

Finally, rational choice theory neglects altruistic motivations by giving primacy to self-interested behaviour. Many rational choice theorists seem reluctant to recognise that not all behaviour is motivated by self-interest and adduce the excuse that self-interest should not be confused with selfish interest (Hechter and Kanazawa 1997). However, such distinction fails to acknowledge altruism, which is by definition not self-interested, let alone selfish. Altruism, as noted by Monroe (1994), within the framework of rational choice theory is simply denied and transformed into "deferred self-interest", where the altruistic act has the aim of one's own personal gratification. Monroe stresses the importance of the

intentions over the consequences. If an action results in a benefit to another, regardless of the actor's motivation, it cannot be considered altruistic. Accordingly, altruism is "behaviour intended to benefit another, even when doing so may risk or entail some sacrifice to the welfare of the actor" (1994, p. 862).

5.1 The Actors' Meanings

A perhaps more fundamental problem with RCT is, as mentioned previously, the insulation of the actor from reality whilst claiming superior knowledge of the actor's motives. The theory removes actors from everyday reality imposing motivations on them that are alien to their way of thinking. It is, of course, reasonable that a social theory should shed light onto the mechanisms behind behaviour that might not be acknowledged fully by actors. However, it is difficult to see how this can be applied to allegedly self-interested action and, in particular, to motivation. By definition, motivation needs to move the subject to act in a certain way. Thus, one needs to be aware of one's motivations in order to make a 'choice'. Whilst there can be unconscious or sub-conscious influences on one's actions, these do not count as 'rational' if the subject is not aware of them nor can the subject make a free choice on how to act. After all, the theory is of rational 'choice', but if actors ignore the reasons why they act in a certain way, are they still pursuing profit? Are they exercising choice? To still consider 'rational choice' what might be habit or a choice made on the basis of reasons other than utility seems to stretch the definition of rational behaviour too far. In doing so, rational choice theorists impute the wrong motives to actors and exercise guess-work rather than analysing the data, including the narratives of the actors.

In summary, RCT's utilitarian framework reduces individual autonomy to a choice based on a 'costs and benefits analysis' thus failing to account for the social embeddedness of individuals, the normative nature of religious behaviour, and, paradoxically, the role of individuals in shaping religious norms by interpreting them and attributing value to them. In Iannaccone's formulation of 'religious capital', adherence to religious norms is seen as an investment on the part of the individual to derive a benefit from participation in the religious community (Iannaccone 1990, 1991, and 1998). Thus, rational choice theory fails to appreciate that the religious person does not adhere to norms out of a calculation of costs and benefits; rather compliance is often an expression of identity and commitment, which are inextricably linked to social relations.

5.2 Weberian Rational Choice Theory

Hedström and Swedberg (1996) present an alternative version of rational choice theory that is heavily reliant on Weber's sociology. Thus, rational choice theory is here a mechanism of "ideal-typical action", based on methodological individualism, to explain "aggregate social systems" (Hedström and Swedberg 1996, p. 129). Hedström and Swedberg refer to situational analysis to "explicate mechanisms that make individual action *social*, in the Weberian sense of the term. Actions are social when the choice of one actor influences or is influenced by the choices of other actors" (Hedström and Swedberg 1996, p. 134). The ideal type is an abstracted construction, which models action. The interests, beliefs and opportunities of an actor are elements of the mechanism. They are

factors of, what appears to be, the same weight in the ‘final calculation’ producing action. Such interests, beliefs and opportunities are decontextualised in the ideal-typical framework.

“The link between the context of action and beliefs, interests, and opportunities of actors, as well as the link between individual actions and collective outcomes, are not part of rational choice theory as such” (Hedström and Swedberg 1996, p. 129).

Hedström and Swedberg misappropriate Weberian sociology by expunging the pivotal reflection on subjective processes. They translate *Verstehen* as ‘intentionality’ (1996, p. 138) stripping it of its fundamental characteristic, which is that of, almost empathetic, understanding. *Verstehende* is the application of empathy in comprehending the meaning of an action from the actor’s perspective. Consequently, actors’ meanings, for Hedström and Swedberg, are factors to compute rather than to understand (*verstehen*). It is true that Weber privileged a rationalistic approach to *Verstehen* that reflected ‘purposive-rational action’ (*zweckrationales Handeln*). However, he recognised the epistemic value of psychological and emotional understanding. Thus, “the ‘recapturing’ of an experience [*die Nacherlebbarkeit eines Erlebnisses*] is important for accurate understanding [*Evidenz*], but not an absolute precondition for its interpretation” (Weber, cited in Harrington 2001, p. 314). Thus, as noted by Harrington, the “[P]sychological acts of sympathy and imagination could be used to grasp the ‘artistic’ or ‘emotional’ context of action” (Harrington 2001, p. 314). This aspect was pivotal to Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

(1905/2001). In the *Ethic*, Weber explored the individual subjective processes, which are not confined to purposive rationality.

This version of rational choice theory, whilst leaving out self-interest as the paramount logic, takes Weberian typologies in a non-problematic fashion. Typologies are abstract constructs, which have less to do with the empirical reality they try to explain than with the mind of the social scientist creating them. Yet, there is no acknowledgement of the bias and context of rational choice theorists and how these play on the framework. Indeed, it can be argued that Weber too showed a strong tendency to read phenomena through the lenses of rationalisation. As noted by Vandenberghe (1999a), the sociologist, for Weber, has no access to the mind of individuals; therefore, it is necessary to construct an ideal-type of possible meanings that can explain action. However, as the ideal-type stops being a construct for the understanding of motivations and becomes an explanatory device for rational action, meanings are lost and the utilitarian logic prevails.

“...it is necessary to construct an ideal-type of the hypothetical meanings or motivations that would explain the observed course of action. ...the problem arises when Weber subsequently tends to reduce this understanding of motives to the understanding of purposively rational action (*zweckrationales Handeln*), sliding thus from a hermeneutically sensitive methodological individualism to the purely utilitarian one which is nowadays advocated and promoted by the world-wide movement of the rational choice theorists” (Vandenberghe 1999a, p. 73).

Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/2001) and *The Sociology of Religion* (1922/1965), are far more focussed on the actors' subjective processes, including their emotions. The *Ethic* is a classical example of a text often cited and often misunderstood by rational choice theorists. RCT scholars seem to be under the impression that the Protestant believers Weber discusses in the *Ethic* are seeking salvation and thus engaging in productive work in order to secure it. This understanding turns on its head not only Weber's analysis, but the fundamental tenet of Protestant theology of *sola fide*. Protestantism was a reaction to the use of good works and indulgences to secure a place in heaven. The purchase of indulgences and the pursuit of 'good works' would have been much more 'rational' in obtaining salvation. Protestants believed that they were saved by faith alone, which could not be proven. For Weber, this caused 'salvation anxiety' which influenced the systematic activity in which they engaged.

Rationality, here, clearly does not equate with profit maximisation or even with choosing the course of action that would most likely guarantee a certain outcome, as supposed by rational choice theory; rather it identifies a methodical procedure. Further, it must be stressed that Weber considered such systematic behaviour the unintended consequence of the doctrine of *sola fide*, rather than the result of intentional, let alone instrumental, action. Salvation anxiety is the unintended consequence, which generates systematic behaviour. Borrowing from Goethe, Weber attributed to such systematic behaviour an 'elected affinity' (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) with capitalist activity, not a causal relationship. Elective affinity does not suggest causality, but an attraction which includes a choice (McKinnon 2010, p. 116). It can be argued that Weber's reflections in the *Ethic* and his sociology of world

religions do not fit neatly with his wider sociology, especially that of ideal types. There is undoubtedly room for misunderstanding and picking and choosing according to one's preference and objective. However, the brief analysis provided here has highlighted the fundamental distortion of Weber's thesis by rational choice theorists, which no amount of theorising could possibly legitimise.

Weber's approach to the study of religion, and society in general, is ground-breaking for recognising the importance of how individuals interpret and live culture. The diversity of religious behaviour warrants an investigation of the actors' meaning (*Sinn*) of their religious ideas and practices. The *Ethic*, despite its focus on economic behaviour, is a testament to the importance of the meaning-making processes the individual activates. As expressed by Talcott Parsons in his introduction to Weber's *The Sociology of Religion*:

"The central problem was whether men's conceptions of the cosmic universe, including those of Divinity and men's religious interests within such a conceptual framework could influence or shape their concrete actions and social relationships, particularly in the very mundane field of economic action" (Parsons 1965, p.xxi).

Weber highlights the inner dimension of the actor and how this is translated into 'rational' (methodical) behaviour. His famous method of *Verstehen*, the understanding of human subjectivity and its interpretative role, is central in order to identify what shapes behaviour. Human beings interact with their environment and attribute different meanings

to every aspect of life. Therefore, individual consciousness plays an important role in 'translating' ideas about the world into one's relationship to them and resulting action. Weber's attention to subjective processes has been mechanised in rational choice theory depriving the subject of meaning. Paradoxically, rational choice theory is the best example of what Weber lamented of the modern era: the succumbing of reason to mechanistic rationalisation.

6. The Authenticity of the Spiritual Revolution

The previous section argued that rational choice theory interprets religious action, as the rational pursuit of self-interest by freely choosing actors, only by discounting the actors' rationales for their choices. Inspired by Max Weber's sociology, rational choice theorists have paradoxically forced the instrumental reason Weber lamented of the modern age on religious decision-making. In contrast, the market logic has been seen as a loss of values bemoaned by scholars who have argued that religion has fallen prey to modern capitalism and has been reduced to a 'commodity' (York 2001; Miller 2004; Carrette and King 2004). Accordingly, the marketisation of religion has turned the 'goods' of religion into commodities and religion into either agent or victim of commodification. The "silent takeover of all aspects of life by the corporate world" (Carrette and King 2004, p.170) has led to "the colonisation of our collective cultural heritage by individualist and capitalist forms of spirituality" (Carrette and King 2004, p.171).

The twin processes of the marketisation and commodification of religion imply that consumer choice eschews considerations of value, and that, worryingly, left to our own devices, we neglect what is to be considered 'authentic' or 'valuable' in religious life. The concern regarding commodification of religious symbols and practices through the 'profane' process of marketisation reveals the normative assumption, according to which there are authentic and inauthentic forms for the expression or worship of the sacred. The theme of authenticity comes out strongly in Paul Heelas' (2008) account of New Age spirituality. Authenticity is, here, the exercise of one's autonomy but also the expression of one's deepest essence. Heelas, one of the most prominent proponents of 'spirituality', has been influenced by Georg Simmel's notion of mystical religiosity (Simmel 1997). Spiritual practitioners, for Heelas, seek to resist the consumer mentality and the consequent 'McDonaldisation' of society (Ritzer 1993). Therefore, in Heelas' account, spirituality tends to be liberating. Thus the analysis will concentrate on his work for it highlights a particular conception of modernity and spiritual sensitivity.

The term spirituality is often used to stress subjective experience and immanence. This is also reflected in the views of lay informants who see spirituality as more abstract and non-theistic, and religion as connected with organisation and belief (Schlehofer et al. 2008). Barker distinguishes between religiosity as believing in a transcendent, personal God, whilst spirituality refers to belief in the God within (Barker 2008, pp. 189-190). For Houtman and Aupers (2007), spirituality leaves behind religion's focus on transcendence to shift towards immanence and the self. Accordingly, the sacred loses its transcendent

character and “becomes more and more conceived of as immanent and residing in the deeper layers of the self.” (Houtman and Aupers 2007, p. 315).

The term spirituality is often employed to denote those forms of spiritual expression that do not require, and indeed might reject, an external authority and a rigid organisation, whilst favouring a form of free expression of spiritual proclivities that are meaningful to the individual. Spirituality studies have highlighted this subjective dimension by demarcating the boundaries between spirituality, as focussed on the self and immanence, and traditional religion, as projected towards an external authority (Heelas 1996, 2006a, and 2008; Heelas et al. 2005; Houtman and Aupers 2007; Tacey 2004). Nevertheless, more recent research has shown the blurred boundaries between religion and spirituality (Ammerman 2013; Palmisano 2009; Pessi 2013) in their use of space, and in practices and beliefs (Bender 2010; Woodhead 2012).

Heelas’ endeavour has been particularly influential in understanding spirituality as alternative to religion and, indeed, in conflict with it. Heelas opposes market-oriented theorists and secularisation theorists who interpret spirituality as self-absorption. His starting point is – what Taylor called – the ‘massive subjective turn’ of modernity, in which the personal experience of the individual comes to be valued more. In his research in New Age spirituality, Heelas finds that spirituality practitioners construct a ‘liberatory’ spirituality, which they contrast with – what is felt as – ‘authoritarian’ organised religion. Accordingly, spirituality shuns doctrine, beliefs and ethical injunctions in favour of

experiences of “the heart of life” (Heelas 2006a, p. 46), and practices that aim to facilitate inner search.

“Spirituality is taken to be *life itself* – the ‘life force’ or ‘energy’ that sustains life in this world, and what lies at the heart of *subjective life*. ... Whereas New Age spiritualities are experienced as emanating from the depths of life within the here-and-now, the spirituality of the Holy Spirit, the spirituality of obeying the will of God, or the spirituality of experiencing the God-head itself are understood as emanating from the transcendental realm to serve life in this world. Take away the theistic God of religious tradition, and there is little left of Christianity (or theistic traditions); take away the God of theism, and New Age spiritualities of life remain virtually intact” (Heelas 2006a, p. 46).

Practitioners claim that through spiritual practices an individual can realise authenticity, being true to oneself, which results in self-fulfilment. As Heelas puts it, spirituality “is experienced as dwelling within the here-and-now; as integral to life; as inseparable from, a natural aspect of, what it is to *be* alive” (Heelas 2006b, p. 224). Heelas language, however, is tinged with a normative stance suggesting that he views spirituality practices and beliefs as inherently valuable. Rejecting the accusation against spiritual practices of being ‘atomistic’ and ‘selfish’ (Heelas et al. 2005), Heelas claims that spirituality is relational and substantial. Thus, although practitioners say that “their participants should only ‘accept’ a teaching if it rings true to their own experience in the here-and-now”, importance is “attached to ‘going deeper’, getting in touch with one’s authentic or natural self, being true to oneself,

expressing love and care, living life to the full: all in the context of 'spirituality'. ... As for the ethical 'substance' of activities, ethics largely come with practice. ... What matters is experiencing the words *through* the practice of yoga, not least through the care and consideration of the practitioner in action." (Heelas 2006a, p. 232). Far from being a solid rebuttal to accusations of self-absorption, the paragraph above leaves one bewildered as to Heelas' interpretation of yoga as an ethical and relational practice.

Heelas also fails to acknowledge the prescriptive aspects of spirituality. The communal values, the rules of conduct and language, the "frames of reference, 'taboos', rules, 'principles', 'how to' instructions, structures ways of growing, and the 'inner' experiences themselves – all skilfully orchestrated by practitioners " (Heelas 2006b, p. 237), all these elements are interpreted by Heelas as aiding self-fulfilment. Among the rules of spiritual practice are the 'taboos' against argument, which are meant to contribute to "consensus and sharing rather than fragmentation or dispersion. ... If support is shown for values which contradict the core values widespread in contemporary New Age spiritualities of life and which thereby serve to disrupt the individual, one-to-one or group quest for harmony and balance, 'sanctions' are likely to be called into play. A member of a spiritual group who persistently makes racist comments will be asked to leave. Some things are simply not said or done" (Heelas 2006b, p. 230).

Heelas considers this prohibition against arguing essential to the 'harmony' of group life and one's quest towards spiritual development thus betraying an uncritical and normative assessment of the research. However, such prohibition of argument may be experienced as

preventing discussion and the solution of disagreements. For Heelas, these practices ensure “participants experience neither the pitfalls of unfettered freedom nor the pitfalls of restrictive conformity” (Heelas 2006b, p. 238). The rules and taboos “are experienced as facilitating liberation from dis-ease [sic] or disharmony. Rules are followed for the sake of freedom. The voluntary exercise of obedience is experienced as enabling participants to express their spirituality through autonomous growth; to act as ‘true’ moral individualists” (Heelas 2006b, p. 233). Yet, there is no reflection on the relationship between obedience and individual autonomy.

Heelas characterises spirituality as revolving around self-authority and self-expression, whilst religion is articulated by religious authorities through structured forms. Consequently, spirituality captures the liberating quest for inner meaning and truth, whilst theistic religion is reduced to adherence to “rationalistic, codified, legalistic prescriptions” (Heelas 2008, p. 127). In his *Spiritualities of Life* (2008), Heelas distinguishes between “spiritualities of life”, which give importance to “freedom, uniqueness and expressivity”, and “life-as religion”, which is characterised by conformity and outside authority (Heelas 2008, p. 55), with the latter option judged to be less valuable. Heelas conflates immanence with autonomy and transcendence with heteronomy. Therefore, only immanent spirituality can guarantee self-authority, whilst transcendent religion gives rise to external obligation.

“Grounded in the past, life-as religion provides detailed information about how one ought to live one’s life. Beliefs, commandments, and ethical precepts are among the numerous vehicles which spell out the good life ... The emphasis is

on conformity, the 'match': being a good Christian by electing to live up to authoritative tradition" (Heelas 2008, p. 55)

Heelas acknowledges the spirituality present in Christianity although, being grounded on the 'transcendent', it is incompatible with 'inner-life spirituality'.

"Logically, it is impossible to reconcile an inner 'god' which facilitates *self*-actualization, the expression of the uniqueness or originality of the person, with the transcendent, theistic God of life-as religion-cum spiritualities, which emphasizes adherence 'to' and places limits on autonomous self-development and expression (notwithstanding the fact that one might have initially elected to take the conformist path)" (Heelas 2008, p. 57).

Heelas recognises that Christians participating in "networks, small groups, retreats and all those other activities operating on the 'edges' of theistic Christianity are more or less at one and the same time drawing on the two sources of authority and significance. The God within *and* the 'God without; ... 'perhaps 'selecting' the best of what the god within and the god without have to offer, to find some kind of experiential harmony; perhaps 'yoga in the aisles' coexisting in an uneasy relationship with 'worship in the pews'" (Heelas 2008, p. 58); or perhaps Heelas just got it wrong. Perhaps there is something more than individual autonomy, especially in relation to ethical living. Heelas eulogises the ethics that "speaks 'from the heart', not 'out of' duty" (Heelas 2008, p. 127). The relationship between universalistic ethics and individual autonomy is a fundamental question of 19th and 20th

century philosophy, which is, here, brushed aside by unrestrained enthusiasm for spirituality.

The echo of Simmel's reflections on mystical religion can be heard in Heelas; yet Simmel's conception of the individual as relational is reduced to the recognition of individuals' need for relationships (Heelas et al. 2005, p. 11). Finally, the frequent references to the 'authentic self' or 'real self', lack any reflection on the relationship between 'authenticity' with ethics, and on what interpretation of ethics is being put forward. The above examination of Heelas' understanding of spirituality allows us to highlight the conflation of forms, be they religious or spiritual, with ethics and freedom, which can be found in the spirituality literature, although mostly implicitly rather than explicitly as in Heelas. Heelas' normative stance might not be matched by other scholars, but sociologists of spirituality tend to overlook the organisational structures of spiritual practices by adhering to the 'paradigm of self-authority' (Wood 2010, p. 274).

A critic of 'spirituality' is Matthew Wood, who thunders against the "pre-eminence of self-authority", "taken to accord with the nature of social life in a postmodernized, privatized, individualized or globalized world" (2007, p. 36). Wood wants to retain the notion of power. Thus, drawing on Bourdieu and Foucault, he claims that the "[S]ubjective experiences of freedom and autonomy are *constituted through* (not merely *grounded or expressed in*) social authorities" (2007, p. 60, emphasis in the original). Wood rightly notes that New Age studies "dichotomize social power into two types of authority – self-authority and external authority – and believe that in the New Age, the former dominates the latter."

(2007, p. 70). For Wood, there are multiple 'relativised' authorities. His work shows "the relativization of multiple authorities, such that no single authority (or range of authorities) exerts a formative influence within the life of a group or individual, and that participation in them comes overwhelmingly from a certain class fraction" (2007, p. 71). He criticises spirituality studies for being focussed on the self and yet failing to ground their subjectivism on a "sociological account of the self" (Wood 2010, p. 272), a point which is addressed in the present thesis (cf. chapter six).

Tacey's interpretation of the 'spirituality revolution' reflects a normative theological perspective. He adopts the language of 'counterculture' against contemporary materialism, which is shared by research participants in the present case study. Thus, for him, it is "a people's revolution ... a counter-cultural revolution, a romantic rebellion against the rise of materialism, inhumanity, and economic rationalism. ... It is about personal autonomy and experimentation, with the use of direct experience of the world as a kind of laboratory of the spirit. ... The spirituality revolution is also about finding the sacred everywhere" (2004, p. 4). This aspect of immanent sacrality is the most interesting element of Tacey's thesis for a sociological reflection. It is reminiscent of Cipriani's 'diffused religion' (1989). Although immanence is too often understood as a post-modern novelty, rather than a 'pre-modern' inheritance (Gorski 2000), it is of significance in contemporary religious forms, be they evangelical environmentalism (Harden 2005; Smith and Johnson 2010) or religious politics (Pally 2011). If we concentrate on the aspect of 'diffused religion', the dichotomy of immanent and transcendent fades away.

Giordan (2012) identifies the spiritual as “the internal and experiential aspect of religion, whilst the institution is the rigid and external form” (2012, p. 67). Giordan, however, refrains from separating religiosity from spirituality preferring to employ the term spirituality as a tool for grasping a tonality of believing in the 21st century (Giordan 2004). Thus, spirituality can be found in the personal inner search and in the relationality of faith communities. For Giordan, the most important aspect of the ‘paradigm’ of spirituality is not the form it takes, but the shift from the institution to the individual. Spirituality is thus “a process of legitimisation of the sacred grounded on the free choice of the subject rather than the obedience to institutional belief” (2012, p. 70). In a similar vein, Hervieu-Léger remarks, in such societies where individual autonomy is a principle, the legitimisation “of belief is moving from religious authorities, guarantors of the truth of belief, to individuals themselves, who are responsible for the ‘authenticity’ of their own spiritual approach” (Hervieu-Léger 2006, p. 60). Thus, spiritual practitioners are not consumers, as RCT implied, but ‘seekers’.

The explorations of spirituality of Wade Clark Roof and Robert Wuthnow identified ‘spiritual seeking’ as a cultural norm that is not confined to spiritual practices, but that also takes place inside religious congregations. In his book *A Generation of Seekers* (1993), Roof identifies in the ‘baby-boomers’ a generation with a culture significantly different from that of the pre-boomers. They distrust authorities and seek self-fulfilment, they value experience over adherence to intellectual statements of belief. In his later book, *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999), Roof claims that the culture of the boomers has solidified. The spiritual search takes different courses. Thus, Roof distinguishes between dogmatists,

born-again Christians, mainstream believers, metaphysical believers and seekers, and secularists. Roof's lucid analysis carries the message that 'spiritual seeking' is endemic to contemporary society rather than a truer or more authentic expression of life. Thus, "... personal autonomy has a double face, one that reflects the dislocations of institutional religious identities in the contemporary world, and a second that mirrors a deeply personal search for meaningful faith and spirituality" (Roof 2003, p. 146).

Therefore, the search for an authentic inner life, a reflexive spirituality aiming at self-fulfilment is not confined to spirituality practitioners, but is shared by forms of 'traditional' religion. Indeed, the 'spiritual' is found to be increasingly present within 'traditional' Christianity (Houtman et al. 2009; Droogers 2007). This emphasis on subjectivity allows individuals to shape how they understand and live their own 'spirituality'. Wuthnow (1998) distinguishes between 'dwelling spirituality' and 'seeking spirituality'. Accordingly, 'dwelling spirituality' is the spirituality lived in churches and centred around the family, typical of the 1950s; 'seeking spirituality' characterises the 1960s search for the spiritual dimension in the individuals' self-expression. Wuthnow seeks to go beyond the dichotomy of spiritual, as centred on the individual, and religious, as centred on institutions, and proposes a 'practice-oriented spirituality' integrating community and personal spirituality.

Wuthnow's dichotomy between dwelling and seeking spirituality is similar to Charles Taylor's distinction between – what he terms – the "*paleo-Durkheimian dispensation*" for which a relationship with the sacred was through one's belonging to a church, and the "*neo-Durkheimian dispensation*", which entitles people to join their denomination of choice,

which is connected “to a broader, more elusive ‘church’, and, more important, to a political entity with a providential role to play” (Taylor 2002, p. 93, emphasis in the original).

“The neo-Durkheimian mode involves an important step toward the individual and the right of choice. One joins a denomination because it seems right to one. And indeed, it now comes to seem that there is no way of being in the ‘church’ except through such a choice.” ... “Coercion comes to seem not only wrong, but absurd and thus obscene” (Taylor 2002, p. 94).

Individual choice in deciding whether to be part of a religious, or spiritual, group is the turning point in contemporary liberal societies. This is accompanied by an expressivist turn, according to which religious life and practice “not only must be my choice, but must speak to me” (Taylor 2002, p. 94). The subjectivism of spirituality studies and of the post-1960s generations tend to give pre-eminence to “the ‘sacralisation’ of subjectivity” (Luckmann 1990, p. 135) and an individualistic self. In contrast, a distinctively Durkheimian approach comes from Gordon Lynch (2007), who stresses the social dimension of – what he calls – ‘new spirituality’. Lynch is attuned to the role of religion in binding communities together.

Lynch’s ‘new spirituality’ is expressed in progressive concerns and originates in the following: “the desire for an approach to religion and spirituality that is appropriate for modern, liberal societies, the rejection of patriarchal forms of religion and the search for religious forms that are authentic and liberating for women, the move to re-sacralize

science (particularly quantum physics and contemporary theories of cosmology), and the search for a nature-based spirituality that will motivate us to try to avert the impending ecological catastrophe.” (2007, p. 10). Practitioners of ‘new spirituality’ construct progressive spirituality in opposition to – what they see as – “patriarchal” religion with “a ‘top-down’ notion of a God, separate from the cosmos, who seeks to order human life in an authoritative way.” (2007, p. 11).

Like their New Age counterparts, progressive spiritual practitioners emphasise personal experience and spiritual search “over and against simple reliance on religious certainties” (2007, p. 24). Lynch stresses the role of “communal traditions and rituals as a framework for deepening and reflecting on personal experience” (2007, p. 58) and likens progressive spirituality to a social movement engendering a shared identity (2007, pp. 85-86). Lynch highlights the communal aspect and the political and social action of progressive spiritual practitioners, such as their involvement with environmental or civil rights’ issues, reflecting – what Inglehart (1981 and 2008) called – the ‘postmaterialism’ of contemporary liberal societies.

The tendency to construct a dichotomy between religion and spirituality has impeded an analysis of the element of the communal identity of groups and the connection between spirituality and engagement in the public sphere. Indeed, spirituality has sometimes been accused of being self-indulgent and narcissistic (Chandler 2008). Research in the ‘engaged spirituality’ of spiritual practitioners is inconclusive (Oh and Sarkisian 2012). The dichotomy religion–spirituality has constructed both realms in essentialistic terms

neglecting the complexity of contemporary Western religious-spiritual forms. Equally, by ascribing an inherent authenticity and freedom of expression to spiritual practices, the spirituality literature has neglected to see these very themes in mainstream religion and the convergence between religion and spirituality. Thus, the next section explores the innovation in practices and sensibility among Christian evangelicals.

7. Evangelical Authenticity

In the past three decades, American evangelical churches have been at the forefront of re-organising how they 'do' church, often by distancing themselves from – what is seen as – institutional or organised religion. The most successful attempts were made by Bill Hybels in Chicago, Rick Warren in Los Angeles and Joel Osteen in Houston. The model of the *Purpose Driven Church* (Warren 1995) responded to the need for 'relevance' of churches for the boom generation. Spiritual seeking was, then, integrated in a religious setting by stressing the search for meaning in community. Christian Smith noted that “evangelicals are creating in their churches opportunities for spiritual nourishment, emotional support, friendships, self-improvement, practical help, and outreach to their surrounding communities” (Smith 1998). Smith (1998) described evangelicalism as “embattled and thriving”. It was thriving because embattled. Evangelicals were responding to societal changes by forming a distinctive group identity made stronger by the contrast and conflict

with the outside world. They were renegotiating tradition by locating the spiritual seeking within a distinctive moral collective identity (Smith 1998, p. 219).

However, Smith conceived 'strength' as adherence to Christian religious beliefs; the importance given to faith in one's life; "confidence and assurance" in one's religious beliefs; participation in church activities; commitment "in both belief and action to accomplishing the mission of the church"; and strength of membership (Smith 1998, p. 21-22). Thus, the stress on doctrinal beliefs and the organisational aspects of church-doing tends to skew the picture of evangelicals in favour of dogmatism and separatism, which Smith later rejected affirming evangelicals' diversity (Smith 2000). Donald Miller captured the transformation of evangelical church-doing in *Reinventing American Protestantism* (1997). Miller charts the emergence of – what he calls – 'new paradigm' churches Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship and Hope Chapel.

These churches have combined contemporary tastes with the 'traditional' Christian message. Accordingly, 'new paradigm' churches have no religious symbols in the building, the dress is casual, and attention is paid to creating a friendly atmosphere (Miller 1997, p. 13), there is a high level of involvement of the laity (Miller 1997, pp. 15-17) and looser structures. The culture of 'new paradigm' churches stresses acceptance (Miller 1997, p. 68) in an attempt to "meet people where they are at", as Miller was told by an informant (Miller 1997, p. 67). 'New paradigm' churches reject – what is felt as – the institutionalisation of religion, its formality, hierarchies and intellectualism, to locate religiosity in a personal

encounter with God. They are the inheritors of the Jesus Movement of the 1960s attracting 'baby-boomers' and 'busters', or 'post-boomers'.

Faith is emotional and experiential; it is transformative of the whole person. 'New paradigm' evangelicals are 'conservative' in doctrine and ethics but engaged in the local community. Miller's book is engaging, although light on theory. The most problematic aspect, however, was Miller's understanding of the changes actuated by 'new paradigm' churches as confined to forms. The changes, for Miller, do not challenge doctrine, but "the medium through which the message of Christianity articulated" (Miller 1997, p. 11). This stance risks 'authenticating' the crystallisation of a specific religious tradition in official dogma as 'true' to the original Christian endeavour (cf. chapter eight).

Sociologists cannot validate practices or beliefs as authentic to a faith tradition, nor can they invalidate them as inauthentic. Christian rituals, beliefs, laws and theologies have changed dramatically over the ages and have been shaped by political, economic and cultural events. Religion as a system of belief reflects the model of Christianity, which, according to influential scholars, began with Ignatius of Antioch in the first century C.E. (Boyarin 2006, p. 10), but which took hold in the third and fourth century. The progressive efforts at defining Christianity resulted in the categorisation of other cultures, such as *Hellenismos*, *Ioudaismos* and *Romanitas*, into belief-systems separate from the culture (Young, cited in Boyarin 2006, p. 11). Further, how well practices and beliefs adapt to the times guarantees the continuity of a tradition. Ultimately, a tradition rests on individual practitioners ascribing value and legitimacy to – what they perceive to be – their religious,

or spiritual, tradition; rather than on the official stamp of approval from religious authorities, let alone from sociologists.

Thus, authenticity is not an external category, but a group's construction of identity to legitimise changes in the light of tradition. Paradoxically, it is precisely this 'epistemic fallacy' that makes Miller blind to the dynamics of the constant modernisation of evangelicals through the claim, or narrative, of practising 'early Christianity', which is in stark contrast with Catholicism, for example, where the tradition of the church has normative value and is fundamental to Catholic identity and ethics. However, Miller, especially in his later book with Flory (2008), offers a window on the fluidity of evangelical identity and its adaptability to contemporary times. *Finding Faith* (Flory and Miller 2008) presents a typology of different ways in which how 'post-boomer' evangelicals engage with the world. This sheds light on the plurality of forms religion is taking today, from innovation to resistance, and the value placed upon social engagement.

Evangelicals have been undergoing a significant process of change in the past two decades. In the UK, Guest (2002, 2004, 2007a, and 2007b) has shown the diversity and spirituality of evangelicals. They have been particularly innovative in the "emerging" grassroots movement, which began in Britain, New Zealand, and Australia (Guest and Taylor 2006). In the 1980s, the "Nine O'Clock Service", a Christian alternative worship service aimed at young people, opened the door to experiments in alternative worship in Britain that emphasised experience and hermeneutical deconstruction. The emerging movement sought to marry experience with "contextual theology", which reflects critically on past

Christian tradition and the contemporary world. The emerging church is conscious of being in – what they interpret as – a ‘post-Christendom’ environment, where the church can no longer impose culture and is part of the wider pluralistic framework.

The emerging movement was a reaction to postmodern culture that forced a rethinking of ‘truth’. Thus, the emphasis is on being open to ‘unorthodox’ opinions and the focus is on formulating authenticity (Guest 2007b; Guest and Taylor 2006). In contrast, in the US, the emerging evangelical movement has a much narrower spectrum of innovation (Labanow 2009, p. 5) and is “defined by a deeply felt disenchantment toward America’s conservative Christian subculture” (Bielo 2011, p. 197). In the emerging movement we can find the motif of authenticity (Bielo 2011; Guest 2007b; Guest and Taylor 2006; Labanow 2009; Tomlinson 1995), which is becoming a feature of mainstream religion (Pessi and Jeldtoft 2012; Pessi 2013).

Authenticity, however, is not disjoint from social engagement. Thus, the spirituality of evangelicals is often an engaged spirituality that not only seeks to ‘save souls’, but also to ‘serve society’ (Unruh and Sider 2005). Unruh and Sider understand the social involvement of churches as ‘spiritual capital’. The concept of “spiritual capital” has emerged in recent years in an attempt to distinguish the contribution of FBOs from secular organisations (Finke 2003; Baker 2009; Baker and Skinner 2006; Graham and Baker 2004). Its origins lie in Iannaccone’s work on religious capital, which has, here, been emptied of its rationalistic and utilitarian logic. As a result, spiritual capital is taken to mean the positive contribution to society by religious organisations; yet it is also understood as the motivation for action

(Baker and Miles-Watson 2010). The contribution of FBOs is too often understood simply as the outcome of the 'faith' of individuals and 'faith' is conceived as the psychological motivation to action.

This normative notion fails to account for the success or failures of action. Volunteering is not always effective or carried out in a constructive manner (Lichterman 2006). Activities such as churches' soup runs have sometimes received criticism for perpetuating the street-based lifestyle of homeless people, instead of helping them out of homelessness (Lane and Power 2009). A more useful approach for the analysis of the contribution of FBOs to the public sphere would be that of 'social capacity' (Lichterman 2006); the analyses of the shared cultural forms and economic resources of social relations through the lens of Bourdieu's original conceptualisation of social capital (Bunn and Wood 2012); the aspect of reproduction and transmission of religion (Davies and Guest 2007; Guest 2007c, and 2008); and the framework of social movements (Beckford 2003). This would allow us to move away from the rose-tinted lenses of spiritual capital and be able to include the negative contributions to society of religious groups and individuals, which include violent action (Smith 1996); and investigations of instances of religion taking political action (Beckford 2010b).

The celebratory rhetoric of spiritual capital is totally absent in the work of Omri Elisha (2008a and 2008b). His nuanced study of evangelicals' social outreach reveals the tension between compassion and accountability. Elisha's evangelicals are torn between moral ideals of accountability on the part of those receiving charity and the 'moral ambition' of

compassion. There is no celebration in Elisha's analysis; on the contrary, he finds the social engagement to be enclosed in conservative attitudes. The focus on relationships and relationships through social engagement, rather than old-fashioned proselytising, is an important feature of evangelicalism today. Building relationships through engagement in society is articulated as adherence to their image of early Christianity, which is often contrasted with the inward-looking self-absorption of – what is seen as – mainstream religion, including mainstream evangelicalism.

Evangelicalism, in good old Protestant tradition, is anti-institutional and suspicious of authority. Thus, evangelicals form new movements and, once 'routinised', to borrow Weber's term, they then distance themselves from them to begin anew. It is rooted in the 'free church' tradition of the church as a "voluntary society" (Van Dyk 2007, p. 126), a society of individuals in personal relationship with God. It is "the 'tradition' of denying traditions", which characterises evangelicalism in its detachment from the church as a religious organisation and its thirst for being "people of God" (Van Dyk 2007, p. 133). Evangelicals are, therefore, 'radical'. They search the roots of Christianity overcoming the obstructions of historical reality.

This radicalism can drive them towards an 'inward asceticism' and rejection of society or call on them for engagement with the world to build the Kingdom of God. The evangelicals' search for authenticity, of being like Jesus, is a powerful narrative driving and legitimising change, but, first and foremost, it shapes individual religious identity. This is because redemption, for evangelicals, comes through individual transformation. Thus, evangelicals

are seeking 'authenticity', to be true to the example of Jesus, which is reinterpreted in every age and in everyone's life. Yet, it is precisely this search that forces constant change to go beyond the social constraints of a specific time. In seeking to transcend themselves, evangelicals reinvent evangelicalism.

8. Conclusions

The chapter has presented a critique of the conceptualisation of religion according to the Protestant model, centred around propositional belief, and of accounts of individual religiosity that sever the individual from the community. In section two, I have argued that secularisation theories have rested on the conception of modernity, constituted primarily by the processes of rationalisation, differentiation, and individualisation. These processes have been understood through the particular lens of Max Weber's notion of disenchantment. Consequently, they have been seen as unique to industrialised modernity and as an epochal break from a presumed pre-modern world of belief and cohesive communities. Section three has examined and contextualised Weber's notion of disenchantment, while section four, by critiquing the ahistorical image of the pre-modern world so fundamental to secularisation theories, has highlighted how this lack of historicity has led to the construction of religion according to a Christian Protestant model.

The cultural milieu of industrialised modernity was influenced by Protestant values, such as sobriety, sincerity, and introspection. Protestant inward focus, fostered by modern philosophies such as the Romantic Movement, contributed to the modern emphasis on individual autonomy. The image of the modern autonomous individual has coloured much of the sociological literature focusing on individual religiosity. However, the assumption of self-authority, in rational choice theory (section five) and the spirituality discourse (section six), detaches the individual from the group and thus ignores the dynamics that shape norms and behaviour (cf. chapter seven). Both frameworks too often neglect to analyse the social elements of spiritual groups: the belonging, structures, rules, and relationships creating normative behaviour and beliefs.

Rational choice theory's vision of the individual is thus one that is disembedded and disembodied. It is disembedded because the individual is taken as an isolated self, free from social constraints and relationships; and it is disembodied because the presumed 'instrumental rationality' discounts the role of the embodied reality of the person in reasoning. Paul Heelas' conception of spirituality is burdened by a normative and essentialistic take that elevates individual autonomy to the highest ethical principle and thus constructs spiritual practices as liberating for not being framed within a traditional religious environment. Nevertheless, spirituality studies have lately come to address the dichotomy between religion and spirituality that has dominated the field.

Roof's and Wuthnow's research in spirituality in congregations has shown that the 'spiritual seeking' of the boom and post-boom generations has transformed religion

radically. The literature on evangelicals has traced some of the most influential and innovative changes in 'doing church'. It suffers, however, from a lack of theorisation and of a closer analysis of what it means to be a Christian, how it is constructed at the individual and group level, and how it is articulated in practice. Finally, the literature on faith based organisations (FBOs) too often presumes the action of religious organisations to be for the benefit of wider society thus ignoring the conflictual nature of ethics (cf. chapters five and seven).

The selection of the literature, reviewed and critiqued in this chapter, aimed to highlight the Protestant bias in constructing religion as propositional belief, which, I argue, fails to understand contemporary Protestantism. The research on evangelical church-doing allows a glimpse of the diversity and innovation of contemporary forms of evangelicalism. However, the lack of a theoretical framework leaves this research unable to provide an account of identity construction at the individual and communal level. The notion of authenticity that is present in the narratives of spiritual practitioners and evangelical Christians is left mostly undefined. Thus, the thesis presents a critique of the most influential formulations of authenticity, those of Charles Taylor and of Alessandro Ferrara, in chapter five, and builds a conception of authenticity, as a process of identity formation, based on a fully relational understanding of the self, as developed in chapter six and applied to the analysis of the empirical case study in chapters eight, nine, and ten.

Chapter Three

Methodology

1. Introduction

Chapter one recounted how this research project emerged from the combination of different factors: personal questions over religious identity and ethics and their role in a pluralistic society; and the move from a policy-oriented approach to an in-depth study into the individual religious identity of a group of Christian evangelicals. Chapter two discussed how theories in sociology of religion have constructed religion in the image of Protestant Christianity. Much of sociological scholarship has taken belief in God or lack of it as the principal aspects of religion and as indicators of its transformation over time. Research on faith-based organisations (FBOs) presented a more positive picture of religion in the public sphere; however this is often marred by a normative approach (Cadge et al. 2011, Montemaggi 2011).

The present study seeks to challenge the established views of religion, and of individual and communal identity by shifting the focus to individual religious identity, understood as relational. It does so by reconceptualising the individual through a relational concept of authenticity. Authenticity is systematised, within a philosophical and sociological framework, with a view to aiding primarily the understanding of religious identity formation; however, its conceptualisation is sufficiently flexible for a wider application in different contexts. The approach, whilst discussing ethical concerns, does not propose a normative conception of authenticity (cf. chapter five). It is also careful to refrain from the conflation of ethics and religion (cf. chapter seven).

The theoretical conceptualisation of authenticity is a vehicle for the often undefined meanings of the local notion of authenticity. Nevertheless, the thesis does not endorse the local notion of authenticity, which is taken as an instance of identity formation. The use of ethnographic methods enabled an appreciation of the nuances of religious identity and culture. Ethnography has often been employed in the study of evangelical Christianity in sociology and anthropology (Guest 2007a; Versteeg 2001; Ammerman 2005; Elisha 2011; Bielo 2009 and 2011; Bender 2003; Smilde 2007; Hall 1997; Orsi 2003; McGuire 2008). It opens a window on a specific culture and on local social practices. Christian evangelicals, having been the subject of extensive research, are not an unfamiliar culture to explore. Thus, the ethnographic work served the purpose of challenging theoretical assumptions and of illustrating the developed theory.

The research aimed to generate theory for a better understanding of religious life by highlighting the meaning of religion for individuals in shaping their identity. The approach taken was to combine the development and systemisation of key ideas in Simmel's sociology with a process of guiding and refining theoretical concepts on the basis of qualitative data. The focus shifted from the 'outer level' of church-doing to the inner level of how individual actors interpret their tradition, the value they ascribe to it and how these processes of interpretation and value formation affect the actors' understanding of themselves and the world around them. This shift onto the subjective processes of actors and their relationality called for a theory that could account for both the individual and the relational dimensions.

Simmel's relational understanding of society also presented the opportunity for a multi-dimensional conception of subjective processes. Simmel allows more complex concepts of both the individual and society and of the relationship between the two (Fitzi 2012). His acute analysis of the transformations of modernity (cf. chapter four) enables an exploration of religious forms against a background of macro-level processes impacting on the daily lives of religious actors. Simmelian sociology, in turn, required a methodology attuned to the relational and subjective dimensions of religious life. Indeed, Simmel's conception of society as social relations and of actors' identity as socially embedded, influenced an important strand of sociology: symbolic interactionism.

Simmel's student Robert Park was one of the founders of symbolic interactionism at the University of Chicago where Herbert Blumer, a student of Park's, studied for his doctorate.

Symbolic interactionism gave prominence to the meaning-making of actors through their social interactions. The Simmelian and Blumerian symbolic interactionism guiding this study is outlined in section four of this chapter. The next section highlights the specific challenges to 'knowledge' raised by the research, namely essentialism, normativity, and reductionism. This is followed by the research design (section three), the epistemology (section four), and a reflection on the impact of the personal identity of the ethnographer in the research process (section five). Sections six and seven espouse the methods employed for data collection and analysis. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the ethical concerns of the research process.

2. Essentialism, Normativity, and Reductionism

Every study presents its own peculiar challenges to what constitutes 'knowledge'. This study is concerned with individual religious identity and the concept of authenticity arising from the field. This presented three distinctive challenges: firstly, the risk of essentialism, of affirming a set of attributes of religion and religious identity, and of validating as 'authentic' local experiences and narratives; secondly, the risk of normativity, of seeking to validate the ethics underpinning the practices and beliefs of research participants; and thirdly, the risk of reductionism, of reducing participants' values to mere narratives in the translation from a theologically-centred worldview to sociological knowledge. The epistemological approach taken, as mentioned above, is symbolic interactionism within a

Simmelian framework. Thus, the researcher interprets the reality under study and, in turn, the beliefs and actions of research participants are an interpretation of Christianity. The reality, of which we gain an understanding, is a construction resulting from the symbolic interactions of participants.

Consequently, with reference to the risk of essentialism, a constructionist-interactionist epistemology understands the narratives of research participants as an interpretation and construction of Christianity and of Christian identity. Thus, whilst the local, or *emic*, category of authenticity refers to 'truth' and is, therefore, essentialist, the theoretical, or *etic*, concept of authenticity is understood as a process of identity formation (cf. chapter six), which is employed to illuminate the local use of the term authenticity without endorsing its underlying values. Thus, references to authenticity are not meant to 'validate' local practices and beliefs, let alone the religious tradition of reference; neither does authenticity refer to an ethical construct. Authenticity is deemed to be a cultural process. It encapsulates what people believe to be 'truths'. It is a process that rests on the actors' interpretation of their tradition and – what they understand as – truth. Such interpretive understanding prevents a validation of the accounts of participants.

In reference to the risk of normativity, my efforts at expunging ethics from the concept of authenticity (cf. chapter five) seek to avoid a normative account of authenticity and of the values espoused by research participants. Although the data guided the theoretical progress, the theory sought to avoid a judgement on empirical reality. This was not done to dismiss ethical consideration, but to follow Max Weber's advice of keeping a 'clear head', a

‘value free’ stance (*Wertfreiheit*) during the research process. Weber was not appealing to ethical neutrality but to be free of bias and ensure “the impartiality of the scientist” (Hennis et al. 1994). He considered value judgments necessary in the heuristic phase in order to identify a problem and formulate a hypothesis, however the analysis of the problem in the research phase needs to be ‘value-free’ (Sztompka 2009, p. 41). Thus for Weber, “empirical science cannot tell anyone what he *should* do – but rather what he *can* do – and under certain circumstances – what he wishes to do” (Weber 1904/1949, p. 54, emphasis in the original).

The overarching reason for excluding ethics from the concepts of authenticity and religiosity lies in the concern of constructing inadvertently a normative dichotomy between ‘good religion’ and ‘bad religion’. In the previous chapter, I argued that the distinction between spirituality and religion is too often normative making one form of spiritual/religious expression superior to the other. Just as religion has been judged authoritarian (Heelas 2008), spirituality has been dismissed as superficial and ‘consumerist’ (Chandler 2008; Miller 2004; York 2001; Carrette and King 2004). These normative accounts of religion and spirituality draw ethical judgements from their understanding of the forms and contents of religiosity/spirituality without assessing the associated ethical behaviours. Thus, I sought to avoid endorsing a particular form or content of religious expression as leading to ethical action. Equally, the thesis does not put forward an ethical ideal or framework on which basis to judge the beliefs and practices of Bethlehem church members or of any other religious actor. A normative account of religion would conflate religion with ethics, and thus neglect to appreciate the social and cultural

dimension of religion and its transformations throughout time. It would also deny the complexity and contested nature of ethics (cf. chapter five).

Finally, the translation of a theologically-centred world view to sociological knowledge poses the risk of reductionism. This is particularly the case when religion is understood through a functionalist approach. An example is the approach purported by Robert Segal (2005), who, whilst acknowledging the array of approaches to the study of religion, distinguishes between 'religionists' and 'social scientists'. According to Segal, 'social scientists' locate the origin of religion in a human need, whilst 'religionists' locate it in God. Origin is here to be understood not simply historically but as originating cause. "Social scientific theories deem the origin and function of religion nonreligious. ... By contrast, theories from religious studies deem the origin and function of religion distinctively religious: the need that religion arises to fulfill is god." (Segal 2005, p. 51).

Segal's functionalist interpretation of religion rests on an intellectualist account of religion as a set of beliefs and practices related to the transcendent. It thus fails to acknowledge the deliberate effort of religious actors to understand their religious tradition in a way that responds to human needs. The point is not that religion is a projection of society and human needs, but a conscious response to them. The effort of religious actors to transform church-doing to be 'relevant', as shown in chapter eight, is a clear example of their self-awareness of the evolving nature of society and its impact on people's lives. Segal is rightly frustrated by phenomenological studies of religion that essentialise and authenticate religion (Segal 1999). Indeed, "too much sloppy research in sociology and, especially

religious studies, has been justified as ‘phenomenological’” (McGuire 2002, p. 209). Nevertheless, ethnographic studies have provided a window on how religious actors understand religion and themselves, including their self-awareness in constructing religion.

Finally, I began the thesis by mentioning my personal ‘quest’ for progressive religion. I feel, therefore, obliged to provide a brief account of my own ethical beliefs. These are far from being systematised in a coherent theory. Despite Kant’s overly rigid conception of ethics, I seem to have a Kantian vein that colours my character. It is a way of being much more than an intellectual standpoint. Having not been schooled in it while growing up, the categorical imperative seems to be part of my genetic code, which is terribly inconvenient whenever I would like to lie and cheat. This is compounded by a stoic attitude, which makes for an austere combination indeed. The Simmelian affinity, though, with its pluralistic universe lightens the burden. I am attracted to the pragmatist endeavour, but still uncomfortable at its vagueness. In short, on a good day, when the government refrains from doing too much damage, I am happy to doubt all truths and universalisms. On a bad day, when the latest anti-immigrant initiative is being flaunted in the media, I seek refuge in Kant: there are things that are just wrong, regardless of whether one agrees with them or not. I take comfort in the failure of the great, from Aristotle to Rawls, in coming up with an exhaustive theory of justice or a universal idea of the good. I think of ethics as a practice, best performed in company.

3. Research Design

The present study sought to develop theory in sociology of religion by challenging the Christian Protestant model of religion, which has dominated the literature (Cadge et al. 2011). Paradoxically, the scholarly Christian Protestant model no longer provides an adequate conceptualisation of religion and belief for Christianity as well as for other religions. The study also sought to bridge the distance between theoretical and empirical works. Too often the study of classical theory is confined to a philological analysis or is detached from concrete reality. Equally, empirical research only rarely yields systematic theory (Hammersley 1992; Snow et al. 2003). Grounded theory is the usual framework for ethnographies. It provides a systematic approach to the analysis of data. However, it is felt that grounded theorising is limited to the 'meso-level' and fails to acknowledge the fundamental ontological assumptions underpinning research.

The need to challenge, or begin to challenge, current paradigms in sociology of religion called for the development of a more robust theoretical framework that would address explicitly the ontological foundations of the research. Specifically, the Simmelian framework of this thesis proposes more nuanced concepts not only of religion and belief, but of individuality and social relations. The concepts of religiosity and belief are dependent on the Simmelian interpretation of the macro social processes of modernity and how these construct the individual and the social. Thus the theory developed in this study builds on Simmel's concepts of relationality, individuality and religiosity, which are dependent on Simmel's philosophical structure (cf. chapter four).

The development of the theory was supported by a study of a Christian evangelical church through the use of ethnographic methods. Ethnography, originally employed in Western anthropology as a descriptive account usually of a remote non-Western culture, came to play a crucial role in the study of urban life in the work of the Chicago School of Sociology, from the 1920s to the 1950s. Since then, ethnography has played an important part in studies that have privileged an interpretative approach to the knowledge of reality. Ethnographies are in-depth studies where the researcher participates in the life of a group, in its own setting, for a prolonged period of time. They provide a rich description of a culture, or of a group, by “understanding events *in context*. *Out of context* the nature of what occurred may be misunderstood” (Hammersley 1992, p. 23). However, for Hammersley, ethnographic description cannot be explanation. On the contrary, “ethnographic descriptions are theoretical only in the sense that they *apply* theories to the understanding of particular phenomena” (Hammersley 1992, pp. 24-25, emphasis in the original).

A core idea underlying ethnographic studies is that “people construct the social world, both through their interpretations of it and through the actions based on those interactions” (Hammersley 1992, p. 44). This need not be taken as a rejection of a reality independent of the observer; rather it stresses the role of social relations in the actors’ interpretation of reality. Further, people’s construction of their social world is mediated by the interpretation and, indeed, participation of the ethnographer. Ethnography is thus a ‘method’ of study that is ‘interpretive’, in that it captures the interpretations of research participants and of the researcher, and ‘interactionist’, for it assumes social reality to be the

result of social interaction. Thus, the focus, in the present study, on the actors' meaning-making processes was best met by ethnographic methods and by the development of a coherent Simmelian framework.

Scholars have often seen theory as secondary to the ethnographic endeavour, with the exception of 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1967), and the 'extended case method' (Burowoy 1998). Hammersley noted that "there are few examples of explicit and sustained attempts at theorising" (Hammersley 1992, p. 39). Snow, Morrill and Anderson (2003) lamented a lack of awareness of the theoretical assumptions underlying ethnographic work (Snow et al. 2003, p. 183). The theoretical discovery is thus too often secondary to the naturalistic description (Snow et al. 2003, p. 184). Fruitful theoretical concepts have emerged from ethnographic work, for example Wood (2007) and Smilde (2007). However, the richness and fragmentary nature of Simmel's sociology called for a focus on theoretical systemisation, to which the ethnographic fieldwork was instrumental rather than the principal source of theory. Thus, the role of ethnography, in the present study, was to guide and illustrate theory, rather than to generate it.

The choice of the church in the study, here named Bethlehem, resulted from the aim to highlight individual religiosity and transformations in church-doing. Bethlehem was set up around 30 years ago in an area of rapid housing development that lacked a community 'hub', as Nicholas, one of the elders, explained in his interview. I was told about Bethlehem by a friend, who works for a religious organisation. I later met with the then pastor, Felix, to learn more about the church activities and religious identity. Bethlehem is a 'free

church', an independent evangelical church, of Baptist origin. The church attaches great importance to social engagement in the local community in the form of providing groups for local people around their needs, such as parent and toddler groups, youth groups, and an elderly group.

The engagement in the public sphere is seen as a way of going back to the example of early Christianity to recuperate the fundamentals of the Christian faith and practice. Evangelicals seek to 'be like Jesus', to follow his example and act in the world to bring about the transformation of society (Tidball 1994). Bethlehem's Protestant theology³ emphasises the role of the individual's faith, which is expressed in a relationship with Jesus. This focus on personal faith allows an examination of the individual dimension of faith. Thus, the case study is a window on how individual members participate within and outside the church, and how they understand and express their faith.

The emphasis on theoretical concepts has imposed limitations on the fieldwork: the focus was on a small number of participants (7-10), part of the congregation, and the data collection happened mostly at the weekly home study group and through interviews. The focus on individuals challenges the sometimes monolithic view of congregations, which fails to highlight "the internal incoherence of religious groups" (Cadge et al. 2011, p. 441). It also shows aspects of religiosity that have been less prominent in recent scholarship. The study seeks to shift the attention from a concern over the role of belief, or lack of it, in religion (Berger 1967; Davie 1994; Voas and Crockett 2005; Bruce 1993 and 2002), over

³ All theological ideas mentioned in the thesis reflect how they are understood at Bethlehem church.

church attendance (Iannaccone et al. 1997; Davie 2007), and over the positive social action of congregations (Baker 2006 and 2008), to the subjective processes of identity formation and the impact of social relations and practices on individual religious identity.

4. Epistemology

This section outlines briefly key epistemological concepts from Simmel's sociology and philosophy, which are explored in more depth in the next chapters. Reality is, for Simmel, in constant movement. Simmel follows Kant in distinguishing between *a priori* Forms⁴ and empirical Contents. For Kant, *a priori* Forms were universal and constant. By contrast, Simmelian Forms are always changing and depend on the content that they take. Forms give a shape to phenomena. We can think of Forms as abstractions that capture social patterns, such as social status, roles, and norms (Tenbruck 1994, p. 358). Forms are also "reciprocal orientations," which represent "a special layer or level of consciousness which is not part of the individual action systems proper" (Tenbruck 1994, p. 353). Individual action systems, as identified by Tenbruck, are Simmel's Contents. Thus Forms, or reciprocal orientations, are an abstract crystallisation of the Content.

⁴ The use of the capital 'F' for Forms, 'C' for Contents and 'L' for Life (*Leben*) is to distinguish the epistemological concepts of Forms, Contents and Life from all other meanings of these words.

“The reciprocal orientations are the conditions which account for stable patterns in interaction and for the regularities of overt behaviour (collective phenomena)” (Tenbruck 1994, p. 353).

Forms may be interpreted as social constructs that provide a mould for empirical occurrences, such as human drives and needs. In the later period of his life, Simmel understood Forms as making Life (*Leben*) able to be experienced and understood, albeit in a partial and temporary construct. In short, Forms are constructs that become ‘obsolete’ or crack under the force of Life, which we may call ‘social change’. Life, for Simmel, is more than social, economic and cultural change; it is reality as a whole. However, for our purposes, we can identify Life with social change, which calls for new Forms. For example, the social and cultural changes of the 1960s have instigated innovation in contemporary church-doing (cf. chapter eight). Accordingly, the hierarchical and bureaucratic Form of church-doing, which emerged from the nineteenth century, no longer accommodated the social relationships, structures and culture of the new milieu.

The fundamental approach to reality of Simmel is one of ‘relativity’ (*Wechselwirkung*), or ‘relationality’, as explained in the next chapter. As such, it requires us to understand Forms as changing crystallisations of the mind. Such multiplicity of reality is ‘understood’ by a synthesis achieved through repeated sifting and ordering (Simmel 1900/2004, pp. 108-110). Following Kant, Simmel understands the synthetic view as ordering reality on the basis of the mind’s constructs. The process is constructed, but also ‘selective’. It is constructed because it reflects the ‘epistemological eye’ of the knower, the mind of the

social scientist; it is selective because perception and, therefore, analysis of reality depends on the 'distance' from the object of knowledge. It is the distance which makes the synthesis and, thus, knowledge possible (Deroche-Gurcel 1988, p. 356). This work of interpretation needs to be understood as an interaction in itself. Philosophical interpretation does not represent reality; rather it encapsulates the relationship of one's mind with reality. The knower looks into him/herself to understand the object.

"... we can always interpret 'external' events *symbolically* only according to 'inner' *analogies* and vice versa, and that both these analogy formations are performed in the *mode of the simultaneous*, that is to say, in the form of a *hermeneutic circle* or of an *interaction*" (Lichtblau 1991, p. 52, emphasis in the original).

We understand reality by synthesising data through the filters of our mental constructs, which give a resemblance of unity. In Simmel's words, "*we inject into reality an ex-post-facto intellectual transformation of the immediately given reality*" (Simmel 1950, p. 8, emphasis in the original). Thus, Forms identify patterned regularities such as norms, boundaries, and statuses. They are 'ideal types', which capture the tension between the constant synthesis of the mind and the multiplicity of Life. Forms are in relation with Contents through the synthetic process of the mind. The synthesis of the mind captures the everyday work of translation of chaotic reality into an ordered reality.

Simmel's complex ontology and epistemology has been influential on the development of symbolic interactionism in the United States, as mentioned previously. Blumer's pragmatist

version of symbolic interactionism is particularly close to Simmel's conception of social life (Low 2008), for it stresses the relational nature of the actors' meaning making processes. There are central features of symbolic interactionism that form the basis of my interpretation of Simmellian Forms. Blumer espouses three premises of his perspective, as follows:

“... the first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them ... The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellow. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (Blumer 1969, p. 2)

Similarly, in Simmel, forms of sociation create frameworks of meaning, such as norms, statuses and roles. Indeed, Blumer affirms that “[H]uman group life is a process of formative transaction. Cultural norms, status positions and role relationships are only frameworks inside of which that process goes on.” (Blumer 1969, p. 116). It should be clarified that, for the purposes of the present research, where the scope is micro rather than macro, it is the ‘inside’ process of meaning of norms, statuses and roles that is of relevance. This process of interaction is about attributing meaning. For Blumer, meaning arises from “the process of interaction between people. The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing.” (Blumer 1969, p. 4). Thus, how the person interprets an object, taking into

consideration how others ascribe meaning to the same thing, guides action. The process of interpretation is the thread that runs through sociation; and sociation, or social interaction, happens through the interpretation of shared symbols. However, it is not simply an adherence to common customs, stereotypes and norms; rather it is a dynamic process which sustains but also challenges shared meanings.

“... interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings. The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action. Accordingly, interpretation should not be regarded as a mere automatic application of established meanings but as a formative process in which meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action. It is necessary to see that meanings play their part in action through a process of self-interaction”
(Blumer 1969, p. 5)

Social norms are in flux. They are produced, reproduced, but also changed by human agency. Human agency, however, is not to be taken as the singular action of individuals as it is in rational choice theory. On the contrary, symbolic interactionism stresses the social dimension of action. Thus “joint action” is “a societal organization of conduct of different acts of diverse participants. ... The joint action has a distinctive character in its own right” (Blumer 1969, p. 17). This is reminiscent of Simmel’s epistemology in *The Philosophy of Money* (1907/2004), where exchange “is the purest and most developed kind of

interaction, which shapes human life when it seeks to acquire substance and content” (Simmel 1907/2004, p. 82).

Such interaction in the process of exchange, the giving and receiving, gives rise to “a new third phenomenon” (Simmel 1907/2004, p. 90). Similarly, Blumer states that the inherent reciprocity of taking into account each other’s meaning “not only relates the action of each to that of the other but intertwines the actions of both into what I would call, for lack of a better word, a transaction ... these two lines of action in their developing interrelationship constitute a singleness” (Blumer 1969, pp. 109-110). The meanings underlying joint actions “are themselves subject to pressure as well as to reinforcement ...they may be challenged as well as affirmed ...” (Blumer 1969, p. 18). Further, human action does not happen in a vacuum; it has a context, however, this is malleable to change. It is this process of meaning making which “creates and upholds the rules, not the rules that create and uphold group life.” (Blumer 1969, p. 19).

There is, of course, a danger of reducing the individual to the group. Indeed, there is also the danger of falling prey to the circular argument according to which the individual is explained in terms of society and society in terms of individuals (Shalin 1986, p. 14). However, this needs to be understood as a “hermeneutical circle which demands as a matter of principle that the part be explained in terms of the whole and the whole in terms of its parts, i.e., that the individual be understood as a subject and object of the historical process and society as a continuously produced and a continuously producing factor in social interaction” (Shalin 1986, p. 14). We all engage in a hermeneutical exercise by

interpreting and defining the situation in front of us. This means that the researcher is also an interpreter of this process. Thus, my own religious, cultural and personal identity played a role in interpreting the local culture of participants, but also in constructing the field, as explored below.

5. Self-reflection

The swathes of articles and books on methodology and research methods digested during my training did not prepare me for the field because, as Landres rightly points out, the ethnographer *is* the field (Landres 2002, p. 105). For Landres, “... ethnographers actively manipulate their identities in order to get what they want in the field setting” (Landres 2002, p. 106). In my case, it was more a question of adapting to the ‘local culture’, rather than ‘manipulating’ my identity. Nevertheless, the embodied nature of ethnographic methods has required reflexivity about my own emotions, thoughts, aims, beliefs, preferences, and about the friendships formed in the field. Ethnography is “relational, emotional, and personal” (Atkinson et al. 2003, p. 56). Thus, the ethnographer is embedded in her own culture, social relations and identity outside the field, but also in the relationships she forms in the field.

“The ethnographer” as argued by Fetterman, “is a human instrument ... The information this tool gathers, however, can be subjective and misleading” (Fetterman 1998, p. 3).

Indeed, I recognised that “*research is conditioned by value biases and factual preconceptions about the group being studied,*” and that “[I]nsider and outsider researchers will differ in the ways they go about building and testing their images of the group they study” (Styles 1979, pp. 148-150, emphasis in the original). Consequently, one’s biases and preconceptions need to be scrutinised and reflected upon. However, this should not lead one to consider the insider’s perspective as holding epistemic privilege (Burke 1984, p. 631; Wiebe 1999, p. 270; A. Geertz 2002, p. 230). The ethnographer aims to grasp the insider’s culture rather than achieve “communion” (C. Geertz 1999, p. 63). Indeed, it is incumbent on the ethnographer to remain critical, whilst taking seriously the experiences and beliefs of research participants (Ingersoll 2002, p. 173).

Ethnography portrays a culture through the understanding of the ‘native’s point of view’ (C. Geertz 1999) with a view to understanding better the internal social structures and dynamics. Thus, an important task is that of ‘making the strange familiar’ and ‘the familiar strange’ (Delamont et al. 2010) in order to see social patterns of language, customs and behaviour. Therefore, in my fieldwork, I moved ‘close’ to research participants to build rapport and gain insight into their view of religious life, but also reflected through my ‘outsider identity’ of being Jewish, as an analytical tool to fight familiarity. Thus, the self-reflection on my ‘outside’ identity served to analyse the interaction with research participants and discover social patterns of behaviour. It is in the interaction, rather than in an imaginary ‘neutral observation’, that patterns are identified and comprehended. The interaction sparks a constant negotiation with oneself and others over ‘understanding’. As

mentioned previously, the 'self' of the ethnographer plays a part in the field and is formed by it.

The self in the field "is a product of the norms of the social setting and the ways in which the 'research subjects' interact with the selves the researcher brings *to the field*" (Reinharz 1997, p. 3, emphasis in the original). Accordingly, I built rapport by absorbing and performing the culture of the field. Like Peshkin, I wanted my non-Christian identity to be forgotten so that members at Bethlehem could be themselves (Peshkin 1984, p. 256). Self-reflection on my identity, in dynamic relation with that of the research participants, has been pivotal in carrying out the research. This concept of self-reflection goes beyond 'reflexivity' in the strict sense of disclosing and reflecting of one's positioning to maintain validity (Cresswell and Miller 2000, p. 127), or of being "sensitive to the interrelationship(s) between herself and the focus of the research" (Delamont 2009, p. 58); rather it identifies, more specifically, an analytical understanding of others, by looking at oneself, and analytical self-understanding, by seeing through the 'eyes' of others.

This approach is based on the epistemological dimension of 'understanding' (*Verstehen*) as originally put forward by Dilthey (1900/1972) and later by Simmel and Weber. *Verstehen*, as formulated by Dilthey, shares little with the concept of empathising with research participants in order to see the world through their eyes; rather it is a dynamic process whereby the researcher understands others through oneself whilst also understanding oneself through others (Harrington 2001, p. 320). We have no knowledge, argues Dilthey, of the inner reality of others; therefore we need to 'reconstruct' the person to make sense

of what we grasp. The sociologist thus synthesises the reality under observation through theoretical constructs, which capture social patterns. The account below provides an example of self-reflection in the field.

5.1 Understanding Others through Oneself

On a Sunday morning of August 2010, in the field of a camping site, I was having breakfast with the participants from the home group. In the middle of mundane chat, Nicholas looked at me and asked “So, what do you make of us?” Put on the spot, my mind scrambled for an answer which turned out to be a light-hearted, banal and clumsy “You are normal”. It was met with laughter, which got me out of the spotlight. In that moment, I felt very ‘visible’. I felt the researcher with white cloak, spectacles, clipboard and pen observing coolly an animal in its natural habitat. All this time, I’ve been trying to take the ‘scientific spectacles’ off, to leave behind the white cloak of my identity, and keep ‘clipboard and pen’ confined to my mind. After a whole year, I was, at least in Nicholas’ eyes, a researcher studying them. All that ‘building rapport’ and ‘fitting in’ crumbled with just one question. As I walked back to my tent I mumbled ‘Malinowski I ain’t’. Yet, I had to come to terms with the fact that one never stops being a researcher no matter how close one gets and that there might always be participants who would think, and rightly so, that one is always on duty even during a camping weekend.

My answer did not raise any further questions, except from me. In one sentence, I ended my ethnographic aspirations. If I saw them as ‘normal’, what was I missing? If they were

‘normal’, what could I learn from them? The first question worried me the most and it was the starting point to answer the second one. How could I make the familiar *strange*? How could I see patterns of behaviour and meaning-making if the ‘natives’ were the dominant group of the culture of which I was part? The answer was staring at me in the mirror: I was the ‘exotic exhibit’ to observe and talk about, the Italian Jew among Christian evangelicals in Wales, rather than a professional ethnographer looking at ‘natives’. Nicholas’ question underlined my role of researcher and outsider. I thus considered more carefully how they saw me, how they behaved towards me to identify their own ‘markers’ of identity. During the camping trip I had been looked after by the two couples *as if* I were a student. Indeed, I was a student, an Italian Jewish student, and also a single female renting a room in a shared house, who found herself among couples, who worked and owned a home. The whole ‘blending in’ and establishing rapport went out of the window. Or better, I realised that I was as ‘inside’ as I could be, well ‘immersed’, but still with my head outside the water. It is in this liminal state that I could make sense of my fieldwork.

I had to observe myself to see what they saw in me and, in turn, how they saw themselves. By focusing on who I was in their eyes, I could see their identity a little more clearly. By reflecting on what made me an ‘outsider’ to the group, I could make visible the social boundary defining the ‘in group’. Amidst British Christian married couples, often with children, my *self* was and is in a liminal state for being a foreigner, Jewish, single and with no fixed residence. I realised that I had always lacked a religious community where I could feel ‘at home’, where I could participate actively and express my religiosity. Indeed, lacking a community, in which to ground my identity of place, language and relationships, my

religiosity had very few certainties. Without a country, a religious community, a family and a home of my own, I was the Simmelian *stranger* (*Fremde*), the one who has a fluid identity that is constantly being challenged and re-shaped.

The stranger, as described by Simmel, is always “the *potential* wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going.” (Simmel 1908/1950, p. 402). The Simmelian stranger is not just an identity, but an epistemological category (Merton 1972). Thus, the identity of the stranger also sheds light onto the invisible lines of connections between the people making up the group, the culture and unwritten rules of the group. The stranger is not simply outside, but “an element of the group itself. His position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it” (Simmel 1908/1950, p. 402). To be a stranger, affirmed Simmel, “is a specific form of interaction” (Simmel 1908/1950, p. 402), which endows the stranger of ‘objectivity’, not in the sense of passivity or detachment, but a participation that is composed of “distance and nearness, indifference and involvement” (Simmel 1908/1950, p. 403). Thus, being a stranger is not to be taken as ‘value-free’ (*wertfrei*) objectivity, but as a complex relation with the research environment and research participants. Being ‘outside’, the stranger sheds light on the ‘inside’ and how that ‘inside’ is constructed. Being a single Italian student with no fixed residence and community, for instance, marked the construction of community that needs to respond to the aspirations and needs of middle class, relatively young couples with children, who are settled in a specific geographical location. These are generalisations, mental constructs, which reveal patterns of socialisation, which impact on the construction of religious identity and community.

6. Data Collection

I entered the field in June 2009 to carry out research in Bethlehem for three months, for my Master's dissertation. This became the pilot for the Ph.D. research. I gained access through Felix, the pastor of the church, whom I contacted after a suggestion from a friend. Following a meeting with the elders to explain the research and gain their approval, I was introduced to the church on a Sunday morning. Access through Felix allowed me to attend the 'home group' bible study in the home of church members. The first 'peek' of the culture of the church was through the leaflets displayed at the entrance of the main hall. Before the pilot study began, I analysed several leaflets describing the groups and structure of the church, and the 'statement of faith' (Appendix A). As mentioned in chapter one, most informants were not aware of the leaflets. I therefore considered it redundant to include their analysis in this thesis.

During the pilot study, in the summer 2009, I attended Sunday services, home group evenings, and most church-run activities, as a participant-observer. I carried out seven unstructured interviews, from which I draw for the doctoral research, with the following: the pastor (Felix), two church members (Dorothea and Will), two elders (Peter and James), and two church employees (Godwin and Lucy). Interviews provided rich data and gave an opportunity to informants to reflect on their personal experience. As the pilot study focussed on the specific activities in the community of the church, I also interviewed the Director of the Evangelical Alliance Wales and the Cardiff County Council officer coordinating homelessness action. These interviews were for triangulation purposes only,

to ensure an 'outsider' view (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, pp. 183-185). Establishing rapport with people in the field was relatively easy. Participants were open and included me in non-church activities such as a barbecue and lunch. Some offered to talk about how they became Christians and what it meant for them, without being asked.

After completing the dissertation for the M.Sc., I continued the empirical work. This was partly due to my intention to maintain contact while working on the theoretical elements of the study, but also what I felt were the expectations of research participants. Thus, whilst I was reviewing the literature and gaining deeper familiarity with Simmel's work, I continued the fieldwork in a 'low key', by primarily attending the home group, where numbers of people present would oscillate between 10 and 15; church-wide fellowship evenings; and informal social events. This had the effect of limiting my access to other settings. "Gaining access to a research site" as Burgess notices, "is not a one-off event. It is instead a social process that occurs throughout a research project." (1991, p. 52). Consequently, when I attended parent and toddler groups nearly two years later, my presence seemed surprising. I also carried out another round of seven unstructured interviews at different moments, as outlined in the following section.

6.1 Interviews

I carried out a second set of interviews with church members (Celia, Selina, Arthur and Camden), one of the elders (Nicholas), the interim pastor (Walter), and an informal interview with Felix, the former pastor. Nicholas and the church members were all part of

the home group. All interviews, except Felix's informal one, were recorded and transcribed whilst some informal conversations were noted in the field notes, together with notes from participant observation. I chose to limit the interviews to members of the home group because I was more familiar with them, I considered them "knowledgeable" of the local culture (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 66), but also because the confines of the home group selected organically a particular group within the congregation. There are three couples in their late 40s and early 50s, and five couples in their late 20s and early 30s. People in the group have formed strong relationships of friendship. This meant that most of the informants represented a very cohesive and, to an extent, homogeneous group. Nevertheless, their opinions on important issues, such as salvation, varied widely (cf. chapter eight).

Interviews with church employees took place in a private room at the church; other interviews took place in the home of informants or at their workplace. One interview took place in a cafe. All the interviews were recorded with permission of the interviewees to ensure rigour and trustworthiness (Morse and Richards 2002; Maxwell 2004). I was aware that this would cause a degree of self-consciousness, however I tried to make the interviewees more comfortable by explaining that there was no set of questions and that they could digress. I also offered to switch the recording off at any point. The interviews focussed on personal religiosity, how interviewees live their faith and their relationship with the church community. They mostly began by asking informants for how long they had been part of the church, whether they were part of a church before that, or, more broadly, their spiritual/faith journey.

The interaction and dynamics of the interviews changed depending on the interviewees' personality and their role in the church. For example, the interviews with the elders were more focussed on the organisational and cultural aspects of the church, while the interviews with members were much more about their personal experiences and allowed more room for digression. The conversation flowed naturally in all cases and, in some, the interviewees felt able to talk at length recounting anecdotes from their lives. I was aware that my spoken and silent reactions tended to show understanding of what was discussed. Thus, my questions aimed at thinking of the same topic from different perspectives. However, I tried not to guide the interviewees and to keep the questions as open as possible.

Interviews were unstructured and trying to resemble a conversation as much as possible. The approach taken was that of the 'cultural interview' (Rubin and Rubin 1995), which aims at an understanding of the local culture. "*Culture* is about how people interpret the world around them by developing shared understandings" (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 20, emphasis in the original). Thus, I sought to avoid the imposition of theoretical categories as far as possible by letting interviewees talk at length about their experiences and how they viewed religious life. As Rubin and Rubin argue cultural interviews "probe for the special and shared meanings that members of a group develop, the kinds of activities that group members typically do, and the reasons why they do them." (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 28). My informants tended to be abstract, even when I pressed them to think of examples or when I used examples. That conceptual approach, albeit by no means shared by all, is also

part of the local culture that, by and large, privileges discussion of the bible and sermons reflecting on everyday life over more experiential forms of worship.

Cultural interviews require rapport between the researcher and the interviewee. Therefore, the choice of informants was confined to participants with whom I had developed a trusting relationship. The cultural interview also engenders empathy (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 12). I was conscious of the interview itself being a form of interaction that produces a self through narration rather than a more authentic mode of data collection (Atkinson and Silverman 1997). All “forms of talk – including narratives and interview accounts – are themselves examples of social action. People do things with words, and they do things with narratives. ... they construct their own lives and those of others; they justify and legitimate past, current, and future actions; they formulate explanations; they locate their own actions within socially shared frames of reference” (Atkinson et al. 2003, p. 117).

“The accounts produced by the people under study must neither be treated as ‘valid in their own terms’, and thus as beyond assessment and explanation, nor simply dismissed as epiphenomena or ideological distortions. They can be used both as a source of information about events, and as revealing the perspectives and discursive practices of those who produced them. ... all accounts must be examined as social phenomena occurring in, and shaped by, particular contexts” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 120).

Interviews, as mentioned, are “social events in which the interviewer and for that matter the interviewee) is a participant observer” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 120). The interview is thus another form of participation in the field, which varied depending on the setting and circumstances. Therefore, interview accounts ought to be integrated with participant observation to enable an analysis of social action: that is “the practices of everyday life, the performance of social selves, or the conduct of social encounters” (Atkinson et al. 2003, p. 116).

6.2 Participant Observation and ‘Engaged Listening’

The fieldwork included observation of what people did and the local environment, such as the layout and furniture of the church, and the characteristics of the homes of participants, including their geographical location. Participant observation has been considered the primary tool of investigation in ethnography. However, it should be recognised that “ethnography is at least as much about conversation as it is about observation” (Forsey 2010, p. 563) and that the reality the researcher is trying to capture is not always easily observable. My preference for listening rather than observing is partly my own ‘personal style’ of experiencing the field (Forsey 2010). Thus, I adopted an ‘engaged listening’ (Forsey 2010, p. 567) to uncover how participants constructed their religious identity. “The aim of the ethnographer”, as argued by Forsey, “is to listen deeply to an/or to observe as closely as possible the beliefs, the values, the material conditions and structural forces that underwrite the socially patterned behaviours of all human beings and the meanings people attach to these conditions and forces” (Forsey 2010, p. 567).

My participation sought to minimise the artificiality of responses or behaviour which note-taking can cause. The notes taken in the field were sketchy aiming at capturing 'data' (Delamont 1992, pp. 52-54). More detailed field notes were written after meetings and activities with accurate and 'thick' descriptions of the people, places, times, ways of speaking and my personal feelings and impressions. Field notes were written as 'factually' as possible, in a 'naturalistic' frame of mind (Emerson et al. 2001), to avoid imposing limited viewpoints or pre-determining the analysis. However, evocative terms were used to enable emotive memorisation of the events. The analysis of the data from participant observation involves, on the one hand, recollection relying on emotions; and, on the other, systematic reflection on the purposes of the study.

Participant observation and listening, as mentioned previously, concentrated, in large part, on the home group sessions and church meetings, and social events. At the home group, I participated more as my familiarity with the group grew. I asked to be put on the home group's 'treats rota', which allocated an evening a term to each to bring sweets and treats for the home group. In specific settings, I would bring my netbook. I chose to purchase a netbook due to its relatively small size to be less intrusive. The netbook accompanied me to the home study groups and fellowship evenings, but it was left at home during Sunday services and other events. There were obvious practical issues to do with the use of the netbook. It was convenient in recording data as many people spoke at the home study group and fellowship evenings. It was suitable, as I did not move around, but remained seated for most of the time. However, the netbook signalled a distance and an identity. It

was a reminder, sometimes more for me than for the research participants, of being 'at work'.

Van Maanen recommends immersion in the field by "[C]utting one's self off for a time and looking to build a life with one's new colleagues" (Van Maanen 1991, p.41). However, he refers to severing oneself from one's everyday physical, social and intellectual spaces, which is fundamentally different from severing oneself from one's religious identity. The distance created by that artificial boundary 'protected' my identity as a Jewish woman, especially when I found the talk on the Old Testament uncomfortable due to the particularistic and inaccurate interpretation of the text and Jewish culture. The intimacy of the home group made the netbook a 'shield' for my 'other' identity. The distance of the 'professional stranger' (Agar 1980) also allowed a glimpse of the social reality under observation. Thus, 'staying distant' was a way of 'getting close' (Gordon 1987).

The contrast between the settings where I would take notes and when I would refrain, such as during social occasions, also allowed different levels of engagement. The writing in the netbook at home group sought to report almost verbatim the discussion of participants, whilst the field notes recounted the impressions and events of the field. I was aware that writing itself is a filter through which we understand events and remember them. Indeed, the field, as argued by Atkinson, "is not an entity 'out there' that awaits the discovery and exploration of the intrepid explorer. The field is not merely reported in the texts of fieldwork: it is constituted by our writing and reading. ... To begin with, the field is produced (not discovered) through social transactions engaged in by the ethnographer. ...

Secondly, the 'field' is constructed by what the ethnographer *writes*. ... Thirdly, it is reconstructed and recontextualized through the reader's work of interpretation and contextualization" (Atkinson 1992, pp. 8-9).

7. Data Analysis

The database of the research is constituted by recorded interviews; notes of the discussions at the home group; and field notes from social and church activities and informal meetings. The focus, as afore mentioned, was on talk. Consequently, the analysis considered the broad narratives of research participants that constructed their view of 'being a Christian'. All interviews were transcribed fully and analysed through coding manually, whilst key interviews were analysed through NVivo software. The initial analysis identified *emic* categories, "indigenous cultural categories" (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 194), such as 'serving', 'spiritual gifts', and 'countercultural'. The perspective of research participants was then reconceptualised through the *etic* categories of the researcher (Fetterman 1998, p. 11). These *etic* categories sought to discern patterns and avoid normativity, as mentioned previously. The development of the Simmelian theoretical framework systematised further these categories. As I progressed with the theoretical framework, the coding through NVivo became redundant and unhelpful. The software could not facilitate analysis across *emic* and *etic* categories. Further, the software, whilst helpful in storing and retrieving data, carried the risk of fragmenting the data, which

become 'decontextualised' from their source to be then 'recontextualised' into analytical categories (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, pp. 155-156).

It is important to recognise that "the process of analysis is intrinsic to all stages of ethnographic research" (Davies 1999, p. 193). Ethnographic research, therefore, needs to have "a characteristic 'funnel' structure, being progressively focused over its course" (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 160). Efforts were, thus, made to ensure an open mind for alternative interpretations and conceptualisations. I was conscious of the importance of scrutinising the data systematically so as to identify any "discrepant data" (Maxwell 1996, pp. 90-93) and assess whether the analysis needed to be reviewed. Thus, I arranged the interview with Selina because I had the impression she was quite distinctive from the rest of the group. Selina's sensibility is closer to Pentecostalism, which has a focus on experiential worshiping and a more conservative theology.

The texts of the interviews were analysed as narratives (Riessman 1993; Cortazzi 1993). Narratives are ways of structuring one's meaning, of giving sense and order to how one understands oneself. The researcher interpreting a narrative asks "why was the story told *that way?*" (Riessman 1993, p. 2, emphasis in the original). This includes how a narrative is organised and what emerges as the focal point. Informants in answering questions attempt to provide a coherent and persuasive account, not one that may appear illogical or meaningless. As "meaning-making structures, narratives must be preserved, not fractured by investigators" (Riessman 1993, p. 4). The texts were analysed using contrasts resulting

from the oppositions presented by informants between, for example, 'religion' and 'being a Christian'.

The analytical approach was abductive (Santaella 2005). Accordingly, a general pattern is drawn out from the observation of a case study. Abduction is, in Peirce terminology, a 'guess', a logical and, yet, intuitive reasoning which suggests a different understanding of the reality under observation. In the case study, the observation of Bethlehem called into questions concepts of social capital, belief and belonging, and prompted the development of a better understanding of the reality being studied. Abduction is an inference that calls for the construct of a new type. Abductive inference is "an attitude towards data and towards one's own knowledge: data are to be taken seriously, and the validity of previously developed knowledge is to be queried" (Reichertz 2004, p. 163). As such, abduction results in "*mental constructs*" (Reichertz 2004, p. 163, emphasis in the original) whose 'validity' lies in functionality. The constructs, at which one arrives through abduction, need to be judged according to their helpfulness in explaining a phenomenon or aspects of a phenomenon. In this thesis, the abductive inferencing challenged pre-constituted concepts of religion, belief, individuality and relationality.

7.1 Writing

Another component of the analytical process is writing. The need for coherence in communicating research findings inevitably raises questions of representation (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, pp. 203-205). Scholars have experimented with a variety

of writing forms to overcome the 'crisis of representation', the questions over the authority of the researcher in interpreting the culture of participants. The present study being concerned with theoretical development sought to be faithful to local meanings whilst transposing them onto an abstract framework. The 'translation' from a theological discourse to a sociological perspective, as mentioned, might be contested as reductive. However, the claim made here is of providing a sociological perspective that helps the understanding of an aspect of the local culture precisely by severing it from its theological framework.

The writing form sought to balance the requirements of systematic theory with the portrayal of a culture. Ethnographic writing entails the use of evocative language to present a vivid portrait of the observed culture. Thus, chapter eight begins with an ethnographic account of the origins of Bethlehem in a narrative style to be more engaging. The account derives from the interviews of informants. The only factual data altered are the names and location to maintain confidentiality. The choice of a narrative style was in an attempt at conveying the atmosphere and culture of Bethlehem church. However, the subsequent extracts are primarily from interviews and serve the purpose to illustrate theoretical concepts, rather than provide an ethnographic description of the local culture. Some interview responses are reported in their full length to avoid a misappropriation of the data to serve the theory and to avoid the breaking up of more emotional accounts.

The names of the informants have been changed with the names from the characters of George Eliot's novels. This was partly due to George Eliot being one of my favourite

authors, but also an author showing a strong religious sensibility. Eliot translated Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841/1989). Like Simmel, she was influenced deeply by his philosophy. Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* (1872/2008) is infused with Feuerbach's concept of religion as consciousness and feeling. For Feuerbach, human beings saw their nature outside of themselves before being able to find it inside of themselves. Dorothea embodies that religious sense, which from evangelicalism turns into mysticism. The use of Eliot's characters is merely to conceal the identity of my informants and, perhaps, to evoke a sense of religious sentiment in approaching Bethlehem church. Thus, the names should not be taken as a reflection of any aspect of the participants' personality.

A further note needs to be spent on Casaubon, who is a mostly fictional character in the thesis and is employed to link parts of dialogue from interviews or conversations. Casaubon is also a device to avoid writing myself into the text. The presence of the researcher cannot be denied; yet explicit references to the thoughts and emotions of the researcher, whilst might be useful in a personal journal, do not serve the purpose of representing the reality of the field, rather they risk being a self-indulgent narcissistic exercise (Delamont 2009). Finally, writing often allows a process of discovery of what was not apparent during the observation. It helps connecting the fragments and seeing the patterns through a theoretical systematisation. The account of a small group of Christian evangelicals aims at capturing patterns of identity formation. The research was limited to a small group in one single church, at a specific time and place, and within a specific geopolitical culture. However, ethnographies do not aim to provide 'generalisable' findings, but a plausible account of a culture (Creswell and Miller 2000). The objective of the study

was to develop concepts that may aid the study of religious identity and possibly be extended to identity formation in other contexts.

8. Ethics

The ethical obligations of research include avoiding deception, asking for the permission to record, and being honest about the intended use of the research (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 94). Participants were informed of the aims of the research and of my personal background when I was introduced to the church during a Sunday service. This included my religious background and political role of elected councillor. During the entire project, there was no perceived or actual conflict of interest arising from my political role (Israel and Hersh 2006, p. 49). Consent was obtained for each interview by e-mail. Research participants at the home group were aware of my role as a researcher. However, a couple of new members joined later; thus it was difficult to know who was aware of the research at any given point. It should be recognised that in “complex and mobile settings, it may simply be impractical to seek consent from everyone involved. Unlike experimental researcher, ethnographers typically have limited control over who enters their field of observation” (Murphy and Dingwall 2001, p. 342).

During the interviews, informants were open in sharing personal reflections and anecdotes from their lives whilst being recorded. However, as the relationship with some key

informants developed into friendship, I began to question what I could include as data without breaching confidence. I left out what I considered confidential, notwithstanding the fact that informants had volunteered very personal information about their lives during recorded interviews. I felt that leaving out personal information was necessary to live up to the trust that informants had in me, which made the research possible in the first place. After all, informants did not know how I would use and present the data.

Finally, researchers have a duty to guarantee that information about participants will be used in such a way as to make “impossible for other persons to identify the participants or for any institution to use them against the interest of the participant” (Flick 2006, p. 49). Research participants were asked for consent for observation and interviews through the elders and individually. It was made clear that every effort was made to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. It should also be recognised that research findings can be reinterpreted and misconstrued once out in the public domain (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000, p. 18). Nevertheless, confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed under all circumstances.

Research participants do not always appreciate that their reserve is needed for anonymity to be maintained. This became apparent when I was contacted to present a talk on my research and the person making the invitation named the church of my case study. My most absolute denials were to no avail given that the information came directly from the former pastor. Most importantly, “participants and informants will remain identifiable to themselves” (Murphy and Dingwall 2001, p. 341). This posed an ethical question for the

present research once completed. The variance in interpretation of salvation had the potential to create divisions once the participants read the account. Therefore, I contacted Nicholas and agreed to discuss it with the new pastor to make him aware of the situation. I also contacted one of the research participants to discuss the matter more in detail.

9. Conclusion

The chapter presented the research design, methodology and research methods employed in this study. A fundamental question arising from the study of religion involves the risk of essentialising religious forms, of validating their ethical stance, but also of taking a reductionist approach to the study of religion. The theoretical framework aims to avoid these problems by stressing the concept of authenticity as a malleable and cultural vehicle for people's understanding of truth. I argued that an appreciation of the insider's culture is at the core of the ethnographic endeavour. However, it is important to remain critical of the accounts of participants and to focus on the social dynamics of religious life, rather than the 'numinous'. Empathy with participants or personal experience of the divine might aid in the representation of religious life through plausible descriptions (Davidman 2002; McCarthy Brown 2002; A. Geertz 2002); yet the focus of sociological research are human beings, not God. This does not exclude the study of religious experience (Neitz and Spickard 1990; Spickard 1991) or imply a reductionist interpretation of it.

The purpose of sociological knowledge is not to 'explain away' religion, but to interpret an aspect of social life. Thus, one's identity also plays an important role in seeing and interpreting social life. The methodology of the research included *Verstehen* through the epistemological tool of self-reflection. *Verstehen*, however, should not be misunderstood as empathic understanding of another's point of view. Indeed, empathic understanding can lead sociologists to give participants a voice without analysing it through sociological lenses. The 'original' *Verstehen* required the development of theoretical constructs, through which to understand others. Thus, self-reflection becomes an analytical and explanatory tool to discern how identity is played out in the field by research participants as well as by the ethnographer. It uncovers the unspoken rules of behaviour and the assumptions underlying practices and narratives.

The ethnographic researcher thus plays the roles of stranger and neighbour; 'hides and seeks' to grasp a very slippery reality; 'moves in' to appreciate the culture under observation, but also 'moves out' to reflect from another angle. This movement and reflection enables a better 'understanding', analytical inference and theoretical formulation. The present research does not endorse or provide a framework for the ethical assessment of local practices. This is not to reject the value of normative oriented projects employing action research, for instance. Embarking in sociological research cannot and should not lead one to profess neutrality. On the contrary, understanding of others and self-understanding can provide a useful reflection on ethics. Indeed, ethnographic research, with its strong focus on meaning-making and particularistic interpretations, can further our understanding of the complexity and sometimes conflictual nature of ethics.

Chapter Four

Georg Simmel

The 'Sociologist of Modernity'

1. Introduction

The second chapter examined the two main approaches to the study of individual religiosity, namely rational choice theory and spirituality, and found them wanting. Spirituality's focus on subjectivity tends to adhere to an overly individualistic conception of the person and a normative understanding of spiritual practices, whilst rational choice theory reduces subjective processes to a utilitarian calculation. In contrast, the relational sociology of Georg Simmel prevents a solipsistic understanding of the individual, while also avoiding an assimilation of the individual into the group, which would dissolve individuality. Simmel's understanding of the individual is deeply relational. His insights on religion provide the platform for a nuanced conception not only of religious sentiment but

of contemporary forms of individuality. Evangelicals, in the case study, show the traditional trait of Protestant individualism, but also affirm the interdependence of the individual and the need for community. The search for authenticity is an individual's journey that is rooted in relationships. This chapter presents the key features of Simmel's sociology, with particular attention to his epistemological notions, on which I build my theoretical framework in the following chapters.

Following a brief introduction on Georg Simmel as the "sociologist of modernity" (Frisby 1985), the chapter discusses the process of individualisation as 'the tragedy of culture' (Simmel 1918/1968), the conflict between 'objective' and 'subjective' culture, which engenders modern subjectivism. This is followed by an examination of his epistemology, articulated, first, through the Kantian distinction of Forms and Contents⁵, and underpinned by the principle of 'relativity' (*Wechselwirkung*); and later refined in his formulation of *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life). The section on relational individuality stresses Simmel's attention to the relation and tension between individuality and sociality, which is resolved in *Lebensphilosophie*. *Lebensphilosophie* enables Simmel to insert the individual and the social within the broader philosophical concern of the relationship between the particular and the universal. The final section of the chapter analyses Simmel's writings on religion, how religion is affected by modernity and its role in overcoming modernity's 'tragedy of culture'.

⁵ As employed in chapter three, the use of the capital 'F' for Forms, 'C' for Contents and 'L' for Life (*Leben*) is to distinguish the epistemological concepts of Forms, Contents and Life from all other meanings of these words.

2. Georg Simmel, the 'Outsider'

Georg Simmel was born on the 1st of March 1858 in a Jewish middle class family of Berlin. He lived in the centre of the city, at the corner of Leipzigstraße and Friedrichstraße (Coser 1965, p. 1). The father, Eduard, had converted to Protestant Christianity. Simmel never really knew his father who died when he was still young. He was brought up by a domineering mother, Flora Bodstein, and a friend of the family, Julius Friedländer. In 1890, he married Gertrud Kinel, a close friend of Max Weber's wife, Marianne (Vandenberghe 2001, p. 8), and a philosopher in her own right. Their son, Hans, later died in the concentration camp of Dachau. Simmel had a long-standing relationship with poetess Gertrud Kantorowicz, from whom he had a daughter, Angela. His home hosted intellectual evenings with artists, philosophers and scholars, such as Stefan George, Rainer Maria Rilke, Heinrich Rickert, Max and Marianne Weber, Georg Lukács, and Ernst Bloch (Vandenberghe 2001, p. 10).

Simmel's famous lectures were attended not only by his students but by an enthralled public. Yet, an 'outsider' of the academic environment and politics, partly due to anti-semitism (Coser 1965, p. 3; Frisby 2002, p. 18), Simmel secured a full professorship only very late in life at the University of Strasbourg. He was one "of the major minds German social science produced around the turn of the century," yet he remained "atypical, a perturbing and fascinating figure to his more organically rooted contemporaries" (Coser

1965, p. 1). He wrote more than two hundred articles and numerous substantive works. He trained in philosophy, writing his thesis on Kant, and considered himself a philosopher (Levine 2010, p. xi). He died of cancer of the liver on the 28th of September 1918, just before the end of the war. He influenced many philosophers and sociologists, including Martin Buber, Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch, Karl Mannheim, and Martin Heidegger (Frisby 2002, p. 24). The American Robert Park, a student of Simmel's, brought his inheritance to the United States. Nonetheless, Simmel was neglected by American sociology, partly due to Talcott Parsons' dismissive views, notwithstanding his own theory drawing so much from Simmel (Levine 2010, p. xvii). Thus, Simmel, as he himself wrote, died without spiritual heirs, but with the consciousness that those who learnt from him took forward his thought in their own distinctive way.

"I know that I shall die without spiritual heirs (and this is good). The estate I leave is like cash distributed among many heirs, each of whom puts his share to use in some trade that is compatible with *his* nature but which can no longer be recognised as coming from that estate" (Simmel, cited in Frisby 2004, p. lvi).

3. The 'Sociologist of Modernity'

Georg Simmel was, for David Frisby (1985), 'the sociologist of modernity'. He captured the transitory and contingent nature of modernity, its subjectivism and fluidity. He wrote: "the

essence of modernity as such is psychologism, the experiencing and interpretation of the world in terms of the reactions of our inner life and indeed as an inner world, the dissolution of fixed contents in the fluid element of the soul, from which all that is substantive is filtered and whose forms are merely forms of motion” (Simmel, cited in Frisby 1985, p. 49). Simmel was particularly sensitive to the process of individualisation that, for him, was at the core of modernity. Simmel’s sociology is characterised by his philosophical preoccupations. He understood modernity within a quasi-Kantian epistemology of Forms and Contents, and, later, of *Lebensphilosophie*.

Simmel’s sociological insights are scattered across the many essays and books he wrote throughout his life. It is, therefore, unsurprising that he should have been described as ‘unsystematic’ (Scaff 1990 and 2005, Kemple 2007), epitomised as an ‘impressionist’ (Frisby 1981, Collins 1994), and, even, transformed into a postmodern (Weinstein and Weinstein 1993). Attempts have been made at bringing ‘order’ into the Simmelian oeuvre. Calabro’ (2004), Backhaus (2003), Kaern (1990), and Segre (1990) focus on the phenomenological vein in Simmel, identifying natural reality as Simmel’s *a priori*. Thus, there are for Simmel ‘stable human qualities’ (Segre 1990, p. 23), whilst, according to Vandenberghe, human drives, rather than being human qualities, are the product of socialisation (Vandenberghe 2001, p. 41). Levine (2012, p. 2) argues that, contrary to the traditional systematisation of Simmel’s thought according to different periods: a Darwinian period, a Kantian period and a final Bergsonian stage of *Lebensphilosophie*, for Simmel integrates Kant and Goethe, who remain his principal interlocutors throughout his life.

Vandenberghe (2001), at first, identified in Simmel's recurrent dualism the underlying principle of his thought; he later rejected this position to emphasise the "aspiration towards wholeness" (Vandenberghe 2010, p. 27), which is present in Simmel's work. A similar position is taken by Pyyhtinen who stresses Simmel's conception of philosophy (Pyyhtinen 2008b, Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen 2008). Levine (2010 and 2012) glimpses an element of 'coherence' in Simmel's complex metaphysical spectrum. I concur with Vandenberghe's later position (2010) and with Levine (2012) in seeing a fundamental unity in Simmel's 'polyphonic' work. It is 'polyphonic' for his early writings are influenced by Spencer's Darwinian philosophy, while later ones resonate with Kant and Goethe. This should not be interpreted in terms of different phases, but of different emphases. As Levine (2012) argues, Kant and Goethe remain Simmel's 'interlocutors' throughout his life. Simmel was in constant dialogue with Kant, but also with Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Plato and Heraclitus. Simmel's 'metaphysical sociology' is not 'unsystematic' or incomplete; rather, like Michelangelo's *non-finito* (unfinished), it provides a glimpse into the 'totality of being', which cannot be crystallised into permanent forms. Simmel's *non-finito* captures the endless unfolding of Life itself.

4. The 'Tragedy of Culture', or Individualisation

In Simmel's sociology, the 'totality of being' is refracted in the myriad aspects of human relations. From these social relations emerge consistent processes and patterns that impact on individuals. For Simmel, in the modern age, we witness a heightened individualisation

due to the increase in “objective culture”, culture that is independent of the individual, over “subjective culture”. “Objective culture” refers to the plurality of cultural artefacts and products that are created in modern times. The individual is inundated by these products in an increasingly differentiated society. “Subjective culture” refers instead to the absorption of the cultural products by individuals, process through which the individual develops culturally and morally. Simmel calls this process the “tragedy of culture” (Simmel 1918/1968), which gives rise to a form of alienation. Modern culture overwhelms the person, who seeks refuge in a heightened subjectivism.

“The real cultural malaise of modern man is the result of this discrepancy between the objective substance of culture, both concrete and abstract, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the subjective culture of individuals who feel this objective culture to be something alien, which does violence to them and with which they cannot keep pace” (Simmel 1909/1976, p. 251).

In modern industrialised society, the individual is “surrounded by an innumerable number of cultural elements which are neither meaningless to him nor, in the final analysis, meaningful. In their mass they depress him, since he is not capable of assimilating them all, nor can he simply reject them, since after all they do belong potentially within the sphere of his cultural development” (Simmel 1918/1968, p. 44). This cultural gap is a result of the division of labour of the modern economy, which creates “objectified cultural forms ... at a rate which exceeds the capacity of human subjects to absorb them” (Levine 1991, p. 107). Simmel acknowledges that human consciousness had to be preoccupied with means in

order for human beings to progress, to have the strength or interest to perform the immediate task without being crippled by the realisation of its ultimate insignificance (Simmel 1907/2004, p 231).

Nevertheless, the “increasing competition and increasing division of labour” render harder the attainment of “the purposes of life,” which “require an ever-increasing infrastructure of means. A larger proportion of civilized man remains forever enslaved, in every sense of the word, in the interest in technics” (Simmel 1907/2004, p 232). The conflict of culture is the clash between Life and Form. Life needs Form to be actualised, but it is constrained by it. More specifically, individuals’ vocations require actual social roles, which, however, may stifle the person’s individuality. Consequently, the yearning for ultimate purpose and meaning of life is connected with the dominance of means over ends in modern culture (Pyyhtinen 2010, p. 52). Against this background, Simmel sees in expressionist art a rejection of Form itself, the search for artistic expression without mediation (Fitzi 2012, p. 189).

Simmel was ambivalent about modernity recognising the benefits to individuals, who became much freer in urban life. Modernity also represented “a great advance for humanity by virtue of encouraging an unprecedented degree of individuation” (Levine 1991, p. 105). Thus, the conflict of culture should not be taken simply as alienation, but as a dialectical mode of thinking (Levine 1991, p. 109). In order to appreciate Simmel’s thought, we need to turn to the building blocks of his epistemology: the distinction between Forms and Contents, and the idea of relationality (*Wechselwirkung*).

5. Simmel's Relational Epistemology

Simmel, as mentioned in the previous chapter, employed the classical philosophical distinction between Forms and Contents. Forms are abstractions that can hold different empirical Contents, such as the drives of individuals, motives, and feelings. Simmel was inconsistent in his use of the term Form, which he interpreted as: a synthetic principle; as a principle of structuration of the social; and the “a posteriori crystallisation of energies or interactions in the cultural objects and social institutions,” such as the sphere of values, science, art or religion (Vandenberghe 2002, pp. 54-55). Accordingly, in the first instance, Simmel's reference to Form needs to be understood as the subject interpreting reality. In the second instance, the Forms of ‘sociation’ (of being in social relations) identify empirical regularities into a pattern of sociation. Specific examples are status, role, and norm (Tenbruk 1994, p. 358). Finally, in the third instance, Forms can be understood as ‘structures’, or better, “schemata which constitute conditions for the intelligibility of the world as a whole or specific aspects of it” (Oakes 1980, p. 10). Forms, as a synthetic principle, are crucial in the apprehension of reality, and are fundamental to Simmel's epistemological principle. I clarify this notion in the section below.

5.1 Synthesis and Sociation

Simmel, like Kant, conceived knowledge of reality as partial and the result of a synthesis by the mind of the observer. He wrote: “human thought always and everywhere synthesizes

the given into units that serve as subject matters of the sciences” (Simmel 1908/ 1950, p. 5). The result of the subject’s synthesis is a Form that is an abstraction, “from a given complex of phenomena, of a number of heterogeneous objects of cognition” (Simmel 1908/ 1950, p. 7). However, contrary to Kant, for whom *a priori* Forms were universal and constant, Simmel considered Forms as dependent on the Content taken and always changing. Later, when Forms become part of Simmel’s *Lebensphilosophie*, Forms are understood to be in opposition to Life (*Leben*). From the never ending flow of Life, Forms crystallise. However they do not fossilise Life; rather, the process of Life is such that Forms are adapted and surpassed by new Forms.

Forms are thus the result of ‘synthetic judgement’: the flux of reality is abstracted into Forms. The synthetic view is a repeated sifting and ordering (Simmel 1907/2004, pp. 108-110) of reality on the basis of the mind’s constructs. Thus, the process is constructed and selective. It is constructed because it reflects the ‘epistemological eye’ of the knower, whose distance from the object of knowledge determines how the object is seen. The view is selective because the distance from the object makes the synthesis, and thus knowledge, possible (Deroche-Gurcel 1988, p. 356).

“Of course this form of interpreting meaning also connects with the *motives* of the persons who are acting, but it subjects their analysis to the *a priori demands of thought*, through which the transmitted events are first formed into a *historical context*” (Lichtblau 1991, p. 49, emphasis in the original).

The synthetic view is a translation performed by the knower through a reshaping of empirical occurrences and, even, subjective motives, which are Contents, according to the mind's Forms. Such Forms are, as afore mentioned, in constant movement and changing throughout time. Thus, the process of synthesis does not happen according to stable *a priori* Forms of the mind; rather it is relational. Simmel's relationality has two dimensions: a sociological and an epistemological dimension. From a sociological dimension, society is not a 'real entity' from which social relations and interactions derive, but the sum of these (Simmel 1890/1982, p. 19). Thus, a sociological object is 'unified' in as much as its parts are in reciprocal dynamic relation (Simmel 1890/1982, p. 17).

Accordingly, "one should properly speak, not of society, but of sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*). Society merely is the name for a number of individuals, connected by interaction. It is because of their interaction that they are a unit" (Simmel 1908/1950, p. 10). Within this framework, the actions of individuals cannot be explained according to the individual's ends, be they conscious or unconscious (Tenbruk 1994, p. 351); rather, actors are 'sociated', they are conscious of being part of social relations, and act with that consciousness. This relationality "implies a shift from substantial reality to *event*" (Pyyhtinen 2010, p. 68, emphasis in the original). Therefore, society is not a substance (*Substanz*), but an event (*Geschehen*) (Simmel 1908/1950, p. 11). *Geschehen* is "the underlying dynamic relations that give rise" to society; it is "society *in statu nascendi*" (Pyyhtinen 2010, p. 72, emphasis in the original).

Simmel writes that the consciousness of associating, or of being socialised, is a “knowing” (*Wissen*) rather than a “cognizing” (*Erkennen*). It is not the result of rational reflection, for “the mind does not immediately confront an object of which it gradually gains a theoretical picture, but that consciousness of the socialization is immediately its vehicle or inner significance” (Simmel 1910, pp. 377-378). This is so because the consciousness of being associated is dependent on the principle of reciprocity, or relationality. In this case, the relationality of individuals does not stop at being associated; rather individuals understand themselves and others through the typifications they hold of others, but also on the basis of the image they have of themselves in relation to others. Nevertheless, the individual is shaped but not exhausted by social relations. This is examined and developed in chapter six. At this point, it is important to outline the epistemological dimension of relationality, here called ‘relativity’. Relationality in Simmel does not stop at being an exchange, but goes deeper and constitutes an epistemological principle.

5.2 The Principle of Relativity

In Simmel’s sociology, individual actors are sociated; they are conscious of being part of social relations, and act with that consciousness. The consciousness of being associated is dependent on Simmel’s broader principle of relationality (*Wechselwirkung*). Simmel develops Kant’s notion of exchange (*Wechsel*) and turns *Wechselwirkung*⁶ (relationality) into the principle underpinning social relations. The principle of interaction

⁶ *Wechselwirkung* is composed of *Wechsel* (exchange) and *Wirkung* (effect). It was used by Kant in relation to Newton’s ‘movement of the planets’ and implies a force of attraction and repulsion between the planets (Papilloud 2000, p. 104).

(*Wechselwirkung*), which underlines Simmel's epistemology, requires an all-round relationality. For Simmel everything is in interaction. Sociological knowledge is possible when the interaction presents regularities and patterns. However, this synthetic work of sociological knowledge and, equally, of philosophical interpretation, is also an interaction in itself. We understand reality by synthesising data through the filters of our mental constructs, which give a resemblance of unity.

In Simmel's words, "we inject into reality an *ex-post-facto* intellectual transformation of the immediately given reality" (Simmel 1908/ 1950, p. 8, emphasis in the original). This transformation is a frame of reference "detached from 'reality', which itself cannot be the immediate subject matter of science" (Simmel 1908/ 1950, p. 8). Relationality (*Wechselwirkung*) is not mere 'interaction', but epistemological 'relativity'. We cannot understand reality but in reference to its dynamic relations. This relationality is here called 'relativity' to stress Simmel's formulation in the light of Einstein's theory, to which he referred in a letter to his friend Heinrich Rickert.

"My kind of relativism constitutes a perfectly positive metaphysical worldview and it is as much scepticism as is relativism in physics as it is represented by Einstein and Laue. Obviously I have not made clear what I mean when I say that truth is relative. Relativity of truth does not mean to me that truth and untruth are co-relational; but rather, I mean that truth is a relation of contents. Neither of the contents is true in itself, just as no physical object is heavy by itself but

only in a reciprocal relation (*Wechselverhältnis*) with another” (Simmel, cited in Kaern 1990, pp. 78-79).

Simmel, with the principle of relativity, rejects the ‘dogma’ of “a single truth that needs no proof” (Simmel 1907/2004, p. 104), in favour of the ‘interrelationship’ of knowledge of the world, according to which “from every point we can attain by demonstration every other point;” such “reciprocity of proofs’ is the basic form of knowledge” (Simmel 1907/2004, p. 104).

“Cognition is thus a free-floating process, whose elements determine their position reciprocally, in the same way as masses of matter do by means of weight. Truth is then a relative concept like weight” (Simmel 1907/2004, p. 104).

Truth is, therefore, dependent on our representations. Simmel recognises that, notwithstanding the fact that our actions are “carried out on the basis of representations that are not at all identical with objective being”, they demonstrate a certain reliability, expediency and accuracy; “whereas other activities based on ‘false’ representations tend to injure us” (Simmel 1907/2004, p. 104-105). Thus, usefulness indicates whether our conceptions of reality are true or false. We call truth “those representations that, active within us as real forces or motions, incite us to useful behaviour” (Simmel 1907/2004, p. 105). Most importantly, for Simmel, objectivity rests on the mutual relationship between

representations. The “ideal of objective truth ... finds its supplement and therewith its legitimation through the other” (Simmel 1907/2004, p. 112).

Relativity is thus “the mode in which representations become ‘truth’, just as it is the mode in which objects of demand become values. Relativity does not mean – as in common usage – a diminution of truth, from which something more might have been expected; on the contrary, it is the positive fulfilment and validation of the concept of truth. Truth is valid, not in spite of its relativity but precisely on account of it” (Simmel 1907/2004, p. 116). Simmel does not undermine the validity of knowledge nor does he think that its validity is relative to a specific frame of reference, such as that of culture or language (Pyyhtinen 2008b, p. 72). On the contrary, Simmel’s relativity is the underlying principle of truth, value and objectivity as “a new concept of solidity” (Simmel, cited in Pyyhtinen 2008b, p. 72), a positive doctrine of knowledge resting on reciprocal conditioning (Vandenberghe 2002, p. 41).

“Truth means the relationship between representations, which may be realized as an infinite construction, since, even if our knowledge is based upon truths that are no longer relative, we can never know whether we have reached the really final stage, or whether we are again on the road to a more general and profound conception” (Simmel 1907/2004, pp. 114-115).

In conclusion, Simmel’s relativity, is a “regulative world principle”, according to which “everything interacts in some way with everything else” (Pyyhtinen 2010, p. 43). The

validity of judgement, whether something is 'really real', is dependent on the relationality of Contents. It rests on a sense of wholeness that is "something of a pantheistic view concerning the whole universe, not only the whole of society;" yet Simmel does not view it as an absolute oneness, but "as a manifold, as a unity of individual, separate elements woven together by relations of reciprocity" (Pyyhtinen 2010, pp. 42-43). Simmel's relational understanding of reality underpins his conception of society and individuality, which is outlined below.

6. Relational Individuality

Simmel, as mentioned previously, understood modernity's tragedy of culture as contributing to the process of individualisation, which involved a heightened subjectivism. He understood the focus on the individual's subjective experience as the result of the dominance of objective culture over subjective culture. The tragedy of culture induced the person to look for authenticity, or "originality" (Simmel 1918/1968, p. 19). Thus, in modern life, there is an inescapable tension between the "restless life of the creative soul" and its own fixed cultural product, "which arrests and indeed rigidifies this liveliness" (Simmel 1918/1968, p. 31). Simmel, however, does not lament a loss of purity brought about by industrialisation; rather, for Simmel, culture is always a synthesis of one's subjective development with an objective value (Simmel 1918/1968, p. 37). He eschews

any romantic ideal of subjective authenticity over objective culture, and identifies in the search for “originality” the symptom of the conflict of modern culture.

“Originality reassures us that life is pure, that it has not diluted itself by absorbing extrinsic, objectified, rigid forms into its flows. This is perhaps a subliminal motive, not explicit but powerful, which underlies modern individualism” (Simmel 1918/1968, p. 19)

Simmel discerns a shift in the cultural understanding of individuality. He viewed the Italian Renaissance as the origin of modern individuality. The Renaissance signalled a loosening of the ties of the medieval community, “a time when individuals believed in no limits to the possibilities of presenting themselves to others with character, distinction and independence” (Simmel 1917/2007, p. 66). This core individuality, for Simmel, unfolds in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in two phases. The eighteenth century is characterised by what he called “quantitative individualism” whilst the nineteenth century exhibits “qualitative individualism” (Simmel 1971). Accordingly, “quantitative individualism” identifies the universal ideal of freedom and equality of the individual reflecting the Enlightenment’s values of the eighteenth-century; whilst “qualitative individualism” identifies the uniqueness of the individual as espoused by the Romantic movement of the nineteenth-century.

In Simmel’s words, “qualitative individualism” is “the individualism of uniqueness” [*Einzigkeit*], of the particular, whilst “quantitative individualism” is “the individualism of

singleness [*Einzelheit*]" (Simmel 1971, p. 224; Simmel 1908/1950, p. 81), which is universal. The understanding of individualism of the eighteenth century was firmly based on the ideas of freedom and equality. At its core was the Kantian conception of the individual as an end in itself based on a universal conception of humanity. By contrast, the nineteenth century saw the shift from a universal understanding of individualism to an individualism based on uniqueness. What mattered was that "one was a particular and irreplaceable individual" (Simmel 1971, p. 222). Distinction becomes important: nineteenth century's romanticism calls for the authentic individual, for being oneself to the full. This distinction is useful in understanding authenticity, as discussed in the next chapter. The twentieth century, for Simmel, needs to tackle the tension between particularism and universalism. In the attempt to reconcile the two, Simmel formulates a *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life).

6.1 *Lebensphilosophie*

In his later work (1918/2010), Simmel re-conceptualised his neo-Kantian framework of Forms through a formulation of *Lebensphilosophie*. *Leben*, here, is modelled partly on Heraclitus' continuous flow. However, Simmel does not abandon Kant; rather he integrates Forms with *Leben*. Drawing on Schleiermacher, Simmel seeks a glimpse of eternity and of the universal in the contingent and particular. He does not conceive of a unity where the particular is subsumed to the universal, but of a dynamic relationship of the two. Simmel re-works his understanding of Forms as essential part of the Life (*Leben*) process. Forms

are in opposition to Life (*Leben*), but are also essential to its process. Thus, Life takes a Form in order to be experienced.

Simmel identifies two dimensions of *Lebensphilosophie*: ‘more-Life’ (*Mehr-Leben*), which is the fundamental dynamic movement of all life forms⁷, and ‘more-than-Life’ (*Mehr-als-Leben*), which transcends the Life process to crystallise into Forms (Simmel 1918/2010, pp. 13-17). Thus, *Mehr-Leben* refers to “the drive toward reproduction, common to all organic species” (Levine 2012, p. 37), whilst *Mehr-als-Leben* is the creation of Forms that become autonomous, which include cultural forms and social structures. These Forms, as noted by Levine, re-engage vital processes reshaping them and need thus to be understood as integral part of the Life process (Levine 2012, p. 37). This conceptualisation of Forms overcomes the tragedy of culture by allowing the individual to grasp the ‘totality of being’ in the constant overcoming of Forms.

Therefore, *Leben* is the fundamental principle of reality. It crystallises into Forms, which, in turn, constrain its constant flow and never reflect the total truth of Life. The relativity principle of *Wechselwirkung* tempers the process of synthesis and maintains the fluidity of Life by conceiving Life and Forms in dynamic relation. In *The View of Life* (1918/2010), Simmel “reversed his position dramatically. Instead of viewing the ongoing life process as threatened by the hypertrophy of objectified cultural forms, he found the ascendance of the idea of Life and the explosion of vital energies so relentless that cultural forms could no longer exert the kind of constraint that they had throughout history” (Levine 2010, p. xxii).

⁷ Life forms can be human or animal.

6.2 Self-transcendence

This dynamic relationship between Life and Forms is best understood as a perpetual process of self-transcendence. In *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (1910/1996), Simmel stated that the quest for the absolute, or transcendence, can be realised only through a partial and individual content (Simmel 1910/1996, p. 24). The absolute is never reached. Nevertheless, human beings, “as knowing beings”, can transcend themselves by virtue of their capacity for interpretation and awareness of the limits of knowledge (Simmel 1918/1971, pp. 357-8). Human beings recognise the partiality of human knowledge. Knowing that “this one-sidedness” is a necessity of cognition places human beings above it (Simmel 1918/1971, p. 358). Thus, “we do not simply stand within these boundaries, but by virtue of our awareness of them have passed beyond them ... That we are cognizant of our knowing and our not-knowing ... this is the real infinity of vital movement on the level of intellect.” (Simmel 1918/1971, p. 358). Human beings glimpse transcendence and thus transcend themselves in the consciousness of their ‘not knowing’. Their ‘not knowing’ is a boundary that is inherent in all human beings. Thus, self-transcendence (*Selbsttranszendenz*) is a fundamental part of human nature (Jankélévitch, cited in De Simone 2002, p. 462).

Leben is ‘this-side’ of the boundary (*Grenze*), but it is also on the ‘other-side’. The Form provides the boundary (Simmel 1910/2007, p. 73). The boundary is essential to the dynamic process of self-transcendence. Self-transcendence is Simmel’s *a priori*, “the true absoluteness” (Simmel 1918/2010, p.10). This “self-transcending consciousness” poses the self between the relative and the absolute (Simmel 1918/1971, p. 364). Simmel does not

want the relationality of Life, its relativity and multiplicity, to be submerged into oneness (Simmel 1910/1996). The absolute totality, absolute *Leben*, is impossible to realise. Forms are necessary for Life to be experienced; yet Forms are temporary because they are within a relational world. Therefore, social reality, for Simmel, is underpinned by a constant becoming and overcoming. Fitzi explains that:

“Human beings are to be seen as ‘beings of the limit’, because their attitude to the world is determined by the fact that, in every dimension of experience, they find themselves constantly moving between two opposing limits ... the existence of limits is fundamental for their continued existence; the individual limits, however, are steadily overcome in a process that does not abolish its principle but each time establishes a new limit.” (Fitzi 2012, p. 189)

In conclusion, modernity, for Simmel, is a time when the person is fragmented in an increasingly differentiated society. Unlike Heraclitus’ constant flow, the process of Life (*Leben*) is the underpinning principle of reality, which is experienced through Forms. The fundamental ‘energies’ of Life take a shape, they take a Form: for example, the vital force of religious “yearning” (Simmel 1911/1997, p. 9) generates religious Forms. However, when a Form is no longer an adequate vehicle for Life’s pulses, there is a crisis that can lead to changes to that Form or create new Forms (Levine 2012, p. 36). Forms cannot constrain Life, which enacts a never-ending process of self-transcendence. Within this framework, human beings are self-transcendent beings by virtue of being aware of “this one-sidedness”, of being part of a wider reality. Humans are ‘this side’, but have a glimpse of

totality, the 'other side'. We thus turn to Simmel's conception of religion as a Form and how his insights can be made employed in the understanding of contemporary religious forms.

7. Religion and Modernity

Simmel referred to religion in many of his writings, but his main essay dealing directly with the matter was *Religion*, written in 1906 and redacted in 1912. Other relevant essays are *A Contribution to the Sociology of Religion* (1898/1955), *A Contribution to the Epistemology of Religion* (1902/1997), and *The Personality of God* (1911b/1997), thus spanning from 1898 to 1911. References to religion, however, are present in most of Simmel's works. Simmel, as his friend Max Weber described him, was 'musical', attuned to religious sensibility. Yet, he was 'methodologically agnostic' (Vandenberghe 2010, p. 7): God is not accessible. He stated that religion is "a product of human consciousness and nothing more" (Simmel 1902/1997, p. 121). However, he rejected the reductionism of imputing religion to a projection of human feelings arising from humans' natural state, such as interpreting the fear of God as a reflection of human awe in front of physical nature (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 145). His reflections were on human psychology and the effect the image of God humans hold has on them.

Simmel was acutely aware that the processes of differentiation, individualisation and rationalisation of modern science and technology posed an existential question for

religious forms of the time. Modern science defined the limits of rationality according to what was 'provable' within a framework of positivist science. Science defines as "believable reality only that which is scientifically probable" (Simmel 1909/1997, p. 4). It does not question particular dogmas, but, for Simmel, "the object of transcendent faith per se is characterized as illusory" (Simmel 1911/1997, p. 9). Modernity sweeps away the "object" of faith, as a set of claims regarding transcendence, forcing religion to turn inward. This is not to mean that religion merely recedes into the private sphere; rather that it assumes more mystical tones.

For Simmel, traditional forms of religion had become less binding in modern culture leading individuals to "satisfy their religious needs by means of mysticism" (Simmel 1918/1997, p. 20). A new Form of religion was required to contain the religious sentiment. Mysticism is the new Form that can express human yearning for transcendence. The fragmented modern individual can glimpse psychological unity through *unio mystica*. Therefore, religion is not just about morals but "reconciliation of the elements of man's nature" (Simmel 1904/1997, p. 41).

"The essence of mysticism is that we should perceive behind the given multiplicity of phenomena that unity of being which is never a given fact, and which therefore we can grasp directly only within ourselves as this unity. ... This unifying of the fragments and contradictions of our view of the world by attributing to them one common, all-embracing source may be the earlier achievement of religion, historically speaking, but it is perhaps only of

secondary importance. Of more fundamental significance, especially as far as modern man is concerned, is what religion makes of the contradictions of spiritual life. Just as this theistic or pantheistic mysticism reconciles the fragmentary nature of the world's elements by unifying them in God, so religious behavior brings peace to the opposing and incompatible forces at work within the soul, resolving the contradictions they create" (Simmel 1904/1997, p. 36).

8. The Form and Content of Religion

Religion needs to be understood within the epistemological framework of Forms and Contents. Accordingly, the Form of religion is the cultural product, what we may call, the 'social construct' of religiosity, which is a type of manifestation of the religious sentiment. Religion, as a Form, identifies the religious institutions, customs, rituals and laws that have arisen from social relations. However, religion is not the projection of social relations, nor is religiosity (*Religiosität*) the result of a social process, but the origin of it. Thus, religiosity is an innate disposition, a sensitivity, which is decoupled from a belief in the supernatural.

Cipriani draws a parallel between *Religiosität* and *Geselligkeit* (sociability). *Geselligkeit* is "the natural tendency people have to be together, to form a community, even if conflicts are present" (Cipriani 2000, p. 87). From *Geselligkeit* derives the cultural product of society.

Similarly, religion is the cultural product of the religious attitude. A phenomenological interpretation would view religiosity as an *a priori* essence. However, I argue that religiosity, as a mode of consciousness, is best understood as sensitivity to self-transcendence (cf. chapter six).

Simmel was inconsistent in his use of the terms religion and religiosity. Nevertheless, a fundamental point in his thoughts on religion, is his formulation of religiosity as an attitude, a “yearning” (Simmel 1911/1997, p. 9), which engenders a particular way of experiencing the world. This notion is akin to the mystical experience of religion, which was shared by Simmel’s contemporary, William James (1902/1960), whom Simmel disliked profoundly. Nevertheless, Simmel does not reduce religiosity to mystical experience or sentiment, nor, indeed, to religious behaviours, rituals or beliefs. Thus, religiosity is not an attribute of someone who has faith; rather it is a disposition of the “soul”, a way of seeing and experiencing life.

It is important to understand Simmel’s references to ‘soul’ as ‘psyche’, for Simmel’s study of religion is a study of the human psyche, rather than a theological reflection. Thus, religiosity, as a Form, acquires a broad and nuanced meaning. It is not a mere preference, but a way of being, which shapes how a person experiences and lives life. Simmel likens it to an artist’s sensitivity to the aesthetic aspects of life. Religiosity does not necessarily manifest itself in religious behaviour, just as an artistic sensibility does not make one an artist; rather it is “the fundamental quality of being of the religious soul” (Simmel

1909/1997, p. 10), which can be deeply present in some individuals and only superficially in others.

“What makes a person religious is the particular way in which he reacts to life in all its aspects, how he perceives a certain kind of unity in all the theoretical and practical details of life ... Religiousness thus can be seen in this light: as a form according to which the human soul experiences life and comprehends its existence” (Simmel 1909/1997, p. 5).

Religiosity thus understood is not reduced to religious belief or practice. Being religious is not given by one's adherence to religious norms and practices, or belonging to a religious community, but by a more subtle and thus, difficult to define, personal characteristic that can be expressed in different ways. Consequently, walking in the woods, dancing or teaching can all be infused with religiosity. Religiosity is a 'mind-set' with blurred contours. Thus defined, religiosity suffers from a lack of clear boundaries, but enables a broader understanding of the religious sentiment, which is manifested in a multiplicity of ways. Just as the artist 'sensitivity' is not necessarily expressed artistically or identifies an artistic talent, religiosity does not necessarily lead to religious behaviour.

What makes Simmel's insights compelling for the understanding of the search for authentic religiosity of contemporary evangelicals is the conception of religiosity as a mode of consciousness, which allows us to appreciate it as fundamental to one's individual identity. A person is a 'religious person' and not someone 'with a religion'. However, we should not

disregard Simmel's framework of Form and Content. In the first instance, Simmel does not identify privileged forms of expression of the religious sentiment. On the contrary, any expression is a crystallisation, which will be surpassed or modified in the future. In the second instance, Simmelian Forms open the door to understanding the Form of religion in its synthetic dimension. Forms identify autonomous systems of understanding.

The synthetic principle of Forms gives rise to an autonomous "world" (Simmel 1918/2010, p. 55), like that of religion. As explained by Oakes, Simmel "describes forms as languages into which the world or aspects of it may be translated. These languages may be conceived as general schemata which constitute conditions for the intelligibility of the world as a whole or specific aspects of it" (Oakes 1980, p. 10). Accordingly, each Form "has its own definitive modes and its own characteristic language. Each form produces a representation of the world that is unique to the form itself" (Oakes 1980, p. 11). This understanding of Forms allows us to appreciate religion not just as an attitude, but also as an overarching perspective. In this conception, religion is a schema ordering one's life.

8.1 The Relationality of Religion

The key components of Simmel's religiosity are: its relationality; a propensity to believe; and a "totalising force" (*Totalisierungsvermögen*). These are important characteristics on which I build my theoretical framework in chapters six and seven. At present, it will suffice to outline how Simmel understood these notions. Simmel conceived the individual and all reality as relational. At times, he suggested that individual religiosity and religious

institutions are the crystallisation of social relationships and, in particular, of relationships of trust (Simmel 1902/1997, pp. 125-126; 1912/1997, pp. 157-158; 1898/1997, p. 118). Indeed, he identifies the sentiment of *pietas*, which originally was a sense of devotion to parental authority, and one's own country, as the sentiment underlying religion (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 161). The sentiment of *pietas* becomes religiosity by gaining autonomy from the social realm (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 158). It could thus be argued that this sense of social trust and devotion crystallises in religion.

The relationality of religiosity stresses the importance of social relationships. However, we should be careful not to give a too Durkheimian reading of Simmel's notion of religiosity. Although Simmel does not develop this point, he does not intend to reduce religiosity to social relationships or God to social unity (Laermans 2006, p. 486). According to Laermans, we can distinguish between two social types of religiosity: belief in the sense of social trust, and the experience of social unity, which expresses a feeling of dependency towards a higher principle. Simmel explains that the "individual feels bound to some general, higher principle from which he originates and to which he ultimately returns, to which he dedicates himself but from which he also expects elevation and redemption, from which he is distinct and to which he is yet identical" (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 156).

Simmel's comments on *pietas* are part of his distinction between religions in antiquity, which were whole cultures, and Christianity, which is a belief system. Accordingly, as mentioned in chapter two, in Greek and Roman cultures, "the religious obligation of sacrifice and prayer, indeed the cult as a whole, is not a personal matter but is imposed on

the individual as a member of a particular group. ... religious dedication, the outward appearance of something that is merely socially necessary, in fact constitutes an inherent feature of the fabric of social norms” (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 160). What makes *pietas* religious is the characteristic of “unselfish surrender and fervent desire, of humility and exaltation, of sensory concreteness and spiritual abstraction; and all this occurs not only in alternating moods, but in a persistent unity” (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 161).

Thus, religiosity is not merely a projection, or crystallisation, of social trust. Whilst Simmel himself did not elaborate the connection between religiosity and social trust, we can attempt to construct a more nuanced rendering of Simmel’s relationality in relation to religiosity by examining his writings on groups. This is dealt with in the following section, which is essential to my notion of sacralisation and the role of tradition in the construction of authenticity, as put forward in chapter seven.

9. Belief, Social Trust, and Groups

I develop Simmel’s conception of religiosity as relational by building on his notion of belief. Simmel contrasted belief, as *believing that*, with belief, as *believing in*. He explains that *believing in* God does not simply equate to holding something to be true; rather “it implies a certain spiritual relationship to Him, an emotional dedication, an orientation of life toward Him” (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 166). By analogy, our *belief in* others does not mean that we

believe in their existence; but that we assume a spiritual attitude in regard to them. In this sense, we can take Laermans' observation of religious belief in the sense of social trust (Laermans 2006). Simmel's notion of relationality is vague. At times, following Lactantius' etymological interpretation of religion from *religare*⁸, he seems to suggest that religion is relational for it provides unity by connecting the person to the world, which is sustained by religion's totalising force. At other times, religion is seen as the result of social relations, which is dependent on the projection of the sentiment of *pietas* onto the transcendent realm.

I retain the first (epistemological) interpretation (cf. section ten), but also develop the notion of *belief in* as the projection of human feelings onto a 'higher principle', which gives legitimacy to one's group and tradition (cf. chapter seven). I do so by linking *belief in* with the projection of human sentiments onto others, one's country and "the gods", put forward by Simmel in his work on the persistence of groups (Simmel 1898a, 1898b, and 1898c). Accordingly, I argue that the feeling of *pietas*, dependency on a 'higher principle', is projected onto the divine, the group and the tradition through which one experiences the relationship with the divine aiding the person's identification with the group. It is the consciousness of a relationship with something higher, such as the divine, which forms the group (Vandenberghe 2001, p. 42). Individualities are thus transcended in the spiritual bond human beings form in the social unity of the group.

⁸ In *Divinarum Institutionum* (IV, xxviii), Lactantius argues that religion derives from *religare* (connecting) against Cicero's interpretation of religion as *relegere* (to treat carefully), as written in *De Natura Deorum* (II, xxviii). http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/02m/0240-0320_Lactantius_Divinarum_Institutionum_Liber_IV_MLT.pdf

“Out of individuals existing side by side, that is, apart from each other, a social unity is formed. The inevitable separation which space places between men is nevertheless overcome by the spiritual bond between them, so that there arises an appearance of unified interexistence” (Simmel 1898a, p. 667) .

The group assumes significance superior to that of the individual. It becomes ‘immortal’. It is worth, however, consider other elements that impact on groups’ continuity. Simmel refers to groups that, whilst changing in membership and forms, maintain continuity in time. He surveys disparate forms of association such as medieval municipal corporations, kingship, and the Catholic clergy. The group goes beyond the life of the individual. Continuity is maintained because change happens slowly and gradually. The new generation does not simply substitute the old generation causing an abrupt shift, but it is inserted into the life of the existing generation so that “the group seems as much like a unified self as an organic body in spite of the change of its atoms” (Simmel 1898a, p. 669). This ‘unified self’ is central to the Christian tenet of the church as body of Christ. Every Christian is, thus, an essential atom in the body of the church stretching infinitely beyond itself.

Simmel highlights constitutive elements of group cohesion, of which I shall only mention elasticity, conflict, honour, and the philosophy of the group. The tendency of a group to be more or less flexible in form is, for Simmel, dependent on the level of complexity and diversity of the group. Accordingly, a conservative policy will unite a diverse group to ensure social preservation. Yet, quantitative changes need to be accommodated by new

structures lest the structure becomes obsolete and collapse (Simmel 1898b, pp. 831-34). A group's "elasticity" (Simmel 1898c, p. 40) depends on the principles governing its structures. For example, the "aristocratic principle," which can apply to the clergy, the family and other social groupings, is characterised by a "severe conservatism" (Simmel 1898c, p. 37). Further, the type of economic production is also conducive to particular forms of groups. Thus, agricultural economics is conservative for it relies on long term arrangements and is epitomised by fatalism, due to the uncertainties of the weather; whilst the bourgeoisie has an attitude of "fluctuation" and will thus be more prone to adapt and metamorphose (Simmel 1898c, pp. 39-41).

In the final part of *The Persistence of Social Groups* (1898c), Simmel identifies antagonism as playing an important role in cementing group unity. This is not simply true in the case of external animosity against the group but of parallel animosity between two groups or sets of individuals. This is explored more fully in *The Sociology of Conflict* (1904). Simmel sees conflict as an active component of social interaction. Simmel's reflections on antagonism are relevant to the present study in reference to the 'rigidity' of Protestantism, which seeks to be true to 'early Christianity' and thus rejects established authority and reinvents religious forms (cf. chapter eight). Simmel contrasts the rigidity of Protestantism with the elasticity of the Catholic Church, which seeks to contain and subordinate antagonistic powers to the Church. By contrast, Protestantism, for Simmel, has relied on being a 'protest' against something. Thus, when deprived of an enemy outside, Protestantism has repeated the conflict "in its own camp and divided itself into a liberal and orthodox party" (Simmel 1904, p. 681).

Another important factor in binding groups is honour (which I develop further in chapter seven). Honour is a particular aspect of morality, which is not necessarily recognised as 'good' by the wider society. Honour, in fact, encapsulates the distinctive character of the group and forms the boundaries of conduct, but also of group membership. Thus, honour among thieves coalesces the class (*Stand*) of that particular social group. Honour is, for Simmel, "one of the most thorough means of maintaining the existence and specific significance of the group" (Simmel 1898a, p. 683). Honour appeals to specific ideas surrounding the essence of the group and the distinctive conduct, which form the boundaries of the group. A similar dynamic to that of honour is given by the philosophy of the group which, although deriving from the individual members, becomes the structure of the group.

Simmel's structures are not to be intended in a 'structuralist' sense; rather they "represent the idea or the power which holds the group together in this particular respect, and they, at the same time, consolidate the group coherence so that it passes from a mere functional to a substantial character" (Simmel 1898a, p. 685). These structures result from individuals projecting their "spiritual content" onto an abstract level of reality, such as country, friend and gods (Simmel 1898, p. 685). The 'gods' are endowed with attributes of the human psyche. This process gives strength and power to the 'gods' and turns them into a source of moral authority.

"Think, for instance, of the idea of the gods, whom men first endowed with all sorts of qualities, worthiness, and excellencies reflected from human souls. Then

the same men used these gods as a source of moral laws and of power to enforce them” (Simmel 1898a, p. 685)

In chapter seven I build on this concept to construct the process of ‘sacralisation’. For the time being, it is important to recognise that a person’s *belief in* others transforms how that person sees them. Accordingly, the person idealises the people who are the object of belief. She projects onto them hopes and ideas drawing on their specific characteristics. It is not a simple projection of the self onto others; rather the people around us arouse in us this spiritual attitude, which gives rise to a deeper bond. *Belief in* God thus shares the same process of idealisation.

10. Religiosity, Relationality, and Unity

The reflections on groups, presented in the previous section, show the subtlety of Simmel’s thought. His conception of the projections of feelings of trust and social relations onto the transcendent sphere may be reminiscent of Durkheim (1912/2008) and, indeed, of Feuerbach (1841/1989). Nevertheless, I believe we should always bear in mind the epistemological value of relationality (*Wechselwirkung*), as the regulative principle underpinning his sociology. Accordingly, society is the sum of social relations and interactions (Simmel 1890/1982, p. 19). Everything is in interaction and therefore ‘in relation’ with everything else. I suggest we understand religiosity as a Form structuring the

experience a person has of reality: religiosity is relational in its ability to synthesise and make sense of reality. Religiosity provides connectedness in the sense that it connects all aspects of life and “resolves all contradictions” (Simmel 1904/1997, p. 36). It bestows, in Simmel’s words, “unity”.

“God conceived of as the unity of existence can be nothing other than the agent of this interlinking, this interaction between things” (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 201).

We thus come to the third element of religion, after relationality and belief: that of a ‘totalising force’ (*Totalisierungsvermögen*). I argue that religion provides unity to the person on the basis of its totalising force. In the individualised and fragmented modern world, religiosity’s ‘totalising force’ goes beyond ‘making sense’ of life; it creates a paradigm for the religious mind. It provides a sense of unity to the person by ordering life’s contradictions in a ‘spiritual’, or religious, dimension. Thus, one lives a ‘religious life’ in every moment, and one’s religious identity, in the sense of self-understanding, becomes paramount. The multiplicity and contrasting aspects of life are unified within the religious consciousness. Religiosity not only unifies “the fragments and contradictions of our view of the world by attributing to them one common, all-embracing source”, but “brings peace to the opposing and incompatible forces at work within the soul, resolving the contradictions they create” (Simmel 1904/1997, p. 36). Thus, the totalising force of religiosity counterbalances the fragmentation of modern individual identity and provides a unified self-understanding by reconciling the

multiple aspects of the self that are played out in social relations. It is, at least in part, a solution to the tragedy of culture.

Simmel's quest for 'unity', to which religion gives expression, is not a mere search for meaning, but the response of religiosity to modernity's fragmentation of the self. The modern self is made of fragments searching for unattainable unity; religiosity is where the self is reconstituted. Simmel parallels this unity with the unity consciousness projects on the person (Simmel 1911b/1997). Accordingly, consciousness bestows wholeness to the person. Human beings are made of physical and psychological elements held together by consciousness, which gives an image of unity to the person. I argue that religiosity holds the person together, for it is a mode of consciousness. A similar process happens in art, reference to which might clarify further this notion.

Works of art, once separate from the artist and life, are objectified cultural forms contributing to modern "alienation", but they are also a means to overcome it (Dörr-Backes 1995, p. 127) for art provides a unifying perspective. Art, just like religion, is the locus for the integration of particularism and universalism. The modern paradigm, for Simmel, is to seek eternity and the universal in the contingent and particular. Simmel does not seek a unity where the particular is subsumed in the universal, but a dynamic relationship of the two, which, in art, he finds in the impressionism of Rodin (Dörr-Backes 1995, p. 126). Simmel sees in Rodin's art the self-transcendence of his own *Lebensphilosophie*, aiming to bridge the gap between being and becoming. In this modern Heracliteanism, as much as in Rodin's art, "all substantiality and solidity of the empirical perspective has turned into

movement. In restless transformation a quantum of energy flows through the material world, or, rather, is the world” (Simmel, cited in Pyyhtinen 2010, p. 58).

In summary, the previous development of Simmel’s thought on religion highlighted three core concepts through which we can begin to construct a nuanced conception of religiosity. In the first instance, the use of Simmelian Forms allows an understanding of religiosity as a way of being, which goes beyond its specific manifestations, such as theological beliefs, customs, and rituals. This overarching sensitivity underpins all these dimensions and gives them meaning. Religiosity is a personal disposition, present in different degrees in different people and, indeed, absent in others, from which religion ensues in whatever form, thus not necessarily according to established religious canons. In the second instance, belief is intended as *belief in* and thus encapsulating a relational attitude of trust. This feeling is projected onto the divine but also one’s group and tradition through which the divine is experienced thus binding and legitimising the group. In the third instance, I interpret religious relationality according to Simmel’s epistemological principle of relativity (*Wechselwirkung*). Accordingly, religion provides unity to the person’s mind. This is sustained by its totalising force (*Totalisierungsvermögen*).

11. Conclusions

Simmel's sociology of religion offers the opportunity to view religiosity not as an attribute of someone who has faith; rather it is a disposition of the person, a way of seeing and experiencing life. Religiosity, however, is not mere 'spirituality' – as we might call it today – but an overarching system, a Form. The advantage of using Forms lies in the capacity to encapsulate an overarching perspective rather than essentialising particularities such as religious belief or belonging to a religious community. Accordingly, religiosity is more than the 'sum of its parts', be they beliefs, rituals or emotions; rather religiosity is an all-encompassing mode of consciousness. In viewing religiosity in its dimension of Form, we free it from the constraints of constructs such as the propositional concept of belief, as an adherence to dogmas, or belief in the existence of supernatural entities. Influenced by Feuerbach (1841/1989), Simmel seeks to reach towards religion's 'essence', that is the inner psychological aspect of religion.

Simmel's 'musicality' in matters of religion assumes quasi-mystical tones, which could be advanced into explorations of the experience of the numinous. However, Simmel is interested in the modern human psyche. Thus, I pursue his reflections on religion in relation to his understanding of the person's psyche caught between individuality and relationality. Simmel's sociology does not subsume individuality to the group, nor does it concentrate on individuality at the expense of the group. It is a composite sociology that dares tackle the fundamental philosophical questions. Equally, his philosophy retains a

deep understanding of the social and captures the human quest for knowledge in a world that is being constructed and re-constructed continuously. Simmel bestows upon us an understanding of religion based on a relational individuality, which aspires to universality. Accordingly, in chapter six, I construct religiosity as a sensitivity to self-transcendence, on which I build my proposed concept of authenticity.

Chapter Five

Authenticity

1. Introduction

The previous chapter outlined Simmel's conception of religiosity as a sensitivity, which is distinctive of the heightened individualism of the modern age. Religiosity is an inner disposition that is lived out in one's everyday life. It is a call to "become who you are" (Simmel 1915/2007). However, as proposed in chapter six, the authenticity of religiosity is not limited to fulfilling one's particular individuality, but has a self-transcendent (universalistic) dimension. I argue that religiosity is a sensitivity to self-transcendence: the sense of being 'this side' (cf. chapter four) and the attempt at going beyond it. This is not manifested in necessarily ethical behaviour nor is it limited to a deep mystical experience of the numinous; rather it is the sense of a wider horizon of truth. The underlying argument of the thesis is that religiosity is being refashioned through the prism of

authenticity due to a heightened individualism of modernity and, at least partly, in response to pluralistic values.

This chapter focuses on the normative assumptions underlying the most influential formulations of authenticity today. It is a necessarily cursive account that aims to question the presumed pre-modern ethical uniformity and the conflation between ethics and authenticity. Thus, the second section explores Charles Taylor's concept of authenticity and MacIntyre's ethics. MacIntyre does not concern himself directly with authenticity, yet his ethical standpoint is very close to that of Taylor. His reflections, however, are useful in pointing to the inalienable influence of tradition on human beings. Accordingly, the intensification of subjectivity in the modern world is seen as unanchored from a universalistic ethics (Taylor 1991 and 2007; MacIntyre 1981), which leaves the individual alone in shaping one's identity and ethics. Their outlook on modernity is predicated on the notion of a pre-modern shared ethical framework, which is undermined by the 'inward turn'.

The next chapter outlines a relational conception of the individual, which counters the reflexive and, at times, solipsistic individualism of contemporary conceptions of the individual. Therefore, this chapter deals with two specific problems: the presumed loss of moral and religious consensus of the pre-modern era; and the ethical aspirations of contemporary philosophers to compensate for such a loss. I should clarify that I do not apply a strict separation between the terms 'moral' and 'ethical'. This is partly due to the

fact that their etymological meaning is the same⁹, but also due to the lack of consensus in differentiating the two in the literature. I tend to use ‘ethical’ and ‘ethics’ in reference to abstract principles while ‘moral’ and ‘morality’ in reference to practices. However, this is not grounded in a theoretical framework, but my own ‘custom’. The following section discusses the assumptions underpinning Charles Taylor’s and Alasdair MacIntyre’s philosophy; while section three explores Alessandro Ferrara’s notion of authenticity, which is partly inspired by Simmel, and Simmel’s ethical reflection. The fourth section clarifies my political-philosophical standpoint and introduces the concept of authenticity I propose in chapter six.

2. The Modern *Fall* and Authentic Salvation

In his book *A Theory of Justice* (1972), John Rawls envisaged a value neutral state as guarantor of justice. Rawls’ liberalism was far from the classical liberalism espoused by John Stuart Mill, imbued with classical moralities (Devigne 2006). Rawls’ liberal conception of society was grounded in the notion of a bounded and self-sufficient individual, at the centre of a well-ordered and homogeneous society maintained by an “overlapping consensus” of principles chosen through the device of the “veil of ignorance,” implying that all rational beings would choose the same fundamental principles. This was met with

⁹ ‘Morality’ derives from the Latin *mos* (custom, one’s disposition/character), while ‘ethics’ derives from the Greek *ēthos* (custom) and *ēthos* (character). On a humorous note, ‘ethics’ as the philosophy of morality is the customary definition for Italian crosswords, which no doubt settles the matter once and for all.

opposition from – what became known as – communitarian philosophers, including Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, among others.

For his detractors, Rawls had detached individuals from their communities, where meanings are formed, and disconnected them from the processes through which moral imperatives, or virtues are developed. In *Political Liberalism* (1993), Rawls recognised that modern democratic societies are characterised by a plurality of beliefs (“comprehensive doctrines”) that can often be irreconcilable. He developed further his idea of “overlapping consensus”, the agreement, between citizens, on principles of justice that enable co-existence without prejudice to diversity. This is dependent on a “reasonable political conception of justice” (Rawls 1987, p. 10) that is shared by different comprehensive doctrines to guarantee a stable and secure polity.

In his seminal work, *After Virtue* (1981), MacIntyre argued that the conception of the ‘good’ is embedded in tradition, for “man without culture is a myth” (1981, p. 161). He revived Aristotle’s account of virtues, whose practice develops the person morally, together with her understanding of the good. MacIntyre criticised the supposedly neutral and universalistic stance of liberal individualism. Kant’s project of morality, based on rationality, had failed. Modern society, in MacIntyre’s eyes, is affected by “emotivism”, which “is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling” (1981, pp. 11-12, emphasis in the original). As such, agreement in moral judgement cannot be secured by any rational method (1981, pp. 12). Yet, it is not clear on what evidence

MacIntyre argues that there was ever a society where moral agreement was determined on the basis of rational argument, rather than might or persuasion.

MacIntyre criticised the universalistic claims' of liberalism for failing to acknowledge that liberalism is itself a tradition. Ironically, MacIntyre has refused to view liberalism as a complex and multifaceted tradition favouring, in its stead, a narrow conception of the 'liberal project' that claims neutrality. His communitarian conception of the aftermath of the Enlightenment seems to be the 'fall' of 'modern man' from the Garden of Eden of *Gemeinschaft*. Yet, whilst individuals are undoubtedly relational, the idealisation of communities by communitarian philosophy neglects to appreciate how communities have too often imposed homogeneity and hierarchies, and marginalised or excluded dissenters. MacIntyre's emphasis on tradition is valuable, however, it comes at the cost of individual freedom and the internal diversity of communities. He also seems to assume that all different communities will come to a similar understanding of the good, or one that is not antagonistic to the others, if they only practised the virtues from within their tradition.

In contrast, Taylor, in *The Sources of the Self* (1989), identified the subjective turn of modernity as the inheritance of the Protestant Reformation, and considered the turn inward not simply an affirmation of individual autonomy, but "a fragmentation of experience which calls our ordinary notions of identity into question" (Taylor 1989, p. 462). Thus, the 'condition of modernity' not only encapsulates the fragmentation of morality, but, paradoxically, of individuality. The subject turns inward and the 'I' becomes a fragmented 'self' in search of authenticity. The search for authenticity is, for Taylor, a form

of self-absorption originating in the three “malaises” of modernity: “the fading of moral horizons”, “instrumental reason”, and “loss of freedom” (Taylor 1991, p. 10). The extreme individualism of the modern age, not tempered by a “higher purpose” (Taylor 1991, p. 4), leads to an obsession with self-fulfilment.

Following Tocqueville, Taylor sees the democratic equality of modern times leading the individual to “self-absorption” (Taylor 1991, p. 4). Individuals are “enclosed in their own hearts” (Tocqueville, cited in Taylor 1991, p. 9) and thus unable to form communities. Pre-modern *Gemeinschaft* is lost for the atomised *Gesellschaft*. This leaves a moral vacuum and a search for impossible fulfilment. Echoing Trilling (1972), Taylor seeks to recuperate the ethical dimension. Thus, he argues that the modern individualistic idea of self-fulfilment is a valid idea that needs to be rescued from extreme subjectivism. Self-fulfilment is not vain egoism or relativistic self-referentiality. There is a moral ideal behind self-fulfilment which is “that of being true to oneself” (Taylor 1991, p. 15). This fulfilment is to be found in something “which has significance independent of us or our desires” (Taylor 1991, p. 82). It is in something ‘bigger than ourselves’, where we can find meaning.

Authenticity, for Taylor, is the foundation for a modern identity that results from one’s moral stance. Thus, identity “is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stance” (Taylor 1989, p. 27). Taylor’s moral horizon is based on “hypergoods”, “goods which not only are incomparably more

important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about” (Taylor 1989, p. 63).

This is explained clearly by Varga (2012), who subscribes to Taylor’s notion of authenticity: authenticity “acknowledges that our wholehearted engagements have a grip on us as on persons embedded in horizons of significance that are partly constituted by qualitative distinctions of worth. While we constitute ourselves through our choices of commitments, these commitments are linked to ideas of the *good* that qualitative *distinctions of worth* are based on” (Varga 2012, p. 160, emphasis in the original). Here, wholeheartedness “means that betraying your commitment would also mean betraying yourself (centrality), and it involves being committed to both the actual project and to entertaining the commitment itself (continuity)” (Varga 2012, p. 160).

This notion of authenticity is based not on a solipsistic and self-enclosed self, but a “dialogical” self. As Taylor points out, “in the culture of authenticity, relationships are seen as the key loci of self-discovery and self-confirmation. Love relationships are ... the crucibles of inwardly generated identity” (Taylor 1991, p. 49). For Varga, “authenticity is about articulating goods from a collective horizon by way of a commitment which requires responsiveness to these more or less locally constituted goods” (Varga 2012, p.161). However, it is not clear how our “interlocutors” (Taylor), or “a collective horizon” (Varga) may compel the individual in pursuing an ethical path. Taylor recognises that there are different views of what constitutes the ‘good’, which one needs to confront.

Taylor does not put forward a substantial conception of the good, nor does he subscribe to Kantian universalistic ethics. The self of Taylor has “moral sources”, but no categorical imperatives. Thus, there are no criteria on the basis of which “hypergoods” should be debated and decided. At times, he seems to believe that there are universal ethical principles upon which agreement is possible, although he does not set out how such agreement is to be achieved. Thus, Taylor constructs a normative but procedural understanding of authenticity to be contrasted with the self-centred version of authenticity, fruit of the malaises of modernity. It is not clear, however, what makes this redemptive version of authenticity more than self-absorption apart from the ‘dialogue’ with other ‘selves’, who might be seeking the same authenticity in very different ways and in ways that might be antithetical to those of others.

Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) and Charles Taylor (1989, 1991 and 2007) unwittingly construct a mythical pre-modern world of cohesive communities, where people believed in God and thus shared an overarching moral universe. One is left confused as to their disregard for the plurality, complexity, and conflictual nature of the past. Undoubtedly, the many abuses of the Church and Christian monarchs were not simply the result of dogma, but were part of a wider geopolitical and economic structure. However, Christian ‘morals’ were imposed with violence by the ruler, be that a monarch or religious authorities, on their own subjects and neighbours. The fiercest materialist would still need to acknowledge the ideological-religious character of the massacre of the Cathars during the Albigensian crusade, in 1209; the expulsion of the Jews from England, in 1290; the persecutions of ‘heretics’ and non-Christians by the Spanish Inquisition and by various

European monarchs; the massacre of the day of St. Bartholomew, in 1572; and the burning at the stake of Giordano Bruno, in 1600, to list but a few examples.

A political incentive, if not motive, can be found in all these examples. However, this is partly due to the fact that religion was not about 'belief in God' or a 'cosmic embeddedness', but the conception of the order of nature, society and power an elite imposed on their competitors and the rest of the population. Far from being a cohesive and uniform world, the pre-modern era was torn apart by political-religious wars. Indeed, the principle *cuius regio, eius religio*¹⁰ had to be proclaimed after drawn-out wars, and, of course, did not include individual freedom of conscience. The 'cosmic embeddedness' of the Peace of Westphalia is very far from the normative conception sung by Taylor or MacIntyre. For Taylor and MacIntyre, the 'melting' of the pre-modern 'solids' (Marx and Engels 1848/2002, p. 223)¹¹ at the hand of heightened individualism has shattered communities and the overarching universalistic ethics.

¹⁰ The principle of the ruler determining the religion of the ruled was recognised in 1555 with the Peace of Augsburg, part of the Peace of Westphalia, concluded in 1648.

¹¹ The reference is used ironically to stress the normative tone of MacIntyre and Taylor and the many abuses of Marx's quote. Marx referred to the economic system of capitalism requiring constant transformation and its impact on society. "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. ... All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind." (Marx and Engels 1848/2002, p. 223).

The condition of modernity is thus ethical fragmentation where we are no longer “governed by impersonal standards justified by a shared conception of the human good” (MacIntyre 2007, p. ix). Although both MacIntyre and Taylor accept pluralism, they presume that diverse societies, without a shared ‘sacred canopy’, are inherently conflictual and individuals no longer inhabit communities, which are sources of meaning. Alessandro Ferrara shares similar ethical preoccupations, although his formulation of authenticity is more nuanced and sophisticated, as outlined in the next section.

3. Authenticity and Simmelian Ethics

Taylor’s notion of authenticity has been criticised by Alessandro Ferrara (1998) for being essentialistic. Ferrara, an admirer of Simmel, formulated his notion of authenticity by grounding it on Kant’s reflective judgment, Aristotelian *phronesis* and Weber’s notion of ethical responsibility (Weber 1919/1970). Kant’s reflective judgment refers to those judgments that are not a generalised universal norm to be applied to given particulars, but judgments arising from given particulars. Specifically, the judgment on taste, from which Ferrara draws his notion of validity, is a subjective judgment that makes a universalistic claim of validity by expecting recognition from others. In other words, when we appreciate an object and call it beautiful, we expect others to share our judgment. Reflective judgment is, therefore, intersubjective. Similarly, Aristotle’s *phronesis* identifies the ability to choose ethically independent of general laws. The conclusions made by *phronesis* cannot be

proven, only 'shown'. Thus, one's choices are shown to others as a model that needs the recognition of others.

Ferrara proceeds to formulate authenticity as an expression of the core of the actor's personality. He draws from Weber's sense of responsibility espoused in *Politics as Vocation* (1919/1991). The sense of responsibility, for Ferrara, "shares all the characteristics of authentic conduct", for it "combines considerations of expediency and value with a deep emotional resonance which stems from the link that this kind of action manifests with the *identity* of the actor" (Ferrara 1998, p. 6, emphasis in the original). Accordingly, authenticity implies faithfulness to one's character, or congruence with one's personal identity. Ferrara, here, takes from Georg Simmel's "individual law", according to which morality cannot be judged on the basis of single actions, but on the basis of the totality of individual life. The "individual law" is duty that is expressed in the entire life of a person: "law can stem from the life unity of the individual unfolding as obligation – or more precisely, the law must be the instantaneous arrangement of it" (Simmel 1918/2010, p. 124). In order to understand Ferrara's interpretation, I explain Simmel's individual law in the section below.

3.1 Simmel's Individual Law

In his attempt to reconcile the universal moral law with individual subjectivity, Simmel conceived of individuality as the door for universalistic value. He rejected the impersonal and objective Kantian universalism whilst seeking to avoid relativistic subjectivism.

Specifically, he rejected the general and abstract law of Kant's categorical imperative, according to which single acts are judged as ethical or unethical on the basis of their accordance with general moral principles imposed by human reason. In its stead, he believed that each act needs to be understood as part of a whole of one's life. Individuals live out, in their own values, universal norms (Vandenberghe 2000). For Simmel, ethical conduct, or better 'duty' (*Sollen*), is dependent on the individual person: the person expresses herself in the act. Ethical conduct requires the whole person; it is not exhausted by the action; rather it is an expression of the self.

"law can only stem from the life unity of the individual unfolding as obligation – or more precisely, the law must be the instantaneous arrangement of it"
(Simmel 1918/2010, p. 124)

Morality, for Simmel, does not originate in Kant's universal reason, but it is apprehended "in the inner uniqueness or solitude in which it is experienced, then morality itself originates from the point where the person is alone with himself, and to which he finds his way back from the 'broad way of sin' – whose breadth signifies not merely its alluring ease, but also its accessibility for all" (Simmel 1918/2010, p. 115). Duty is not imposed by reason (Kant), but by one's subjectivity. However, duty is not subjective, but objective, whether it is recognised as such or not by the individual (Simmel 1896/2008, p. 37). This is so because one's subjectivity is connected with Life (*Leben*). Simmel identifies duty (*Sollen*) with Life itself (Simmel 1896/2008, p. 35). As explained by Levine:

“... life is a single process that encompasses the constituents acts, acts that cannot be judged as moral in isolation. The whole of life enters into each discrete action of the individual, such that there is a universality of the individual, not of the act or moral principle. We cannot, however, deny the objectivity of this individualized morality. Such denial causes humans to slip into pure amoral individualism. Rather we must recognize that the ‘individual law’, the universality of the individual, has a certain objectivity or ‘materiality’ to it. This conception, Simmel argues in a final added passage, means that the whole life is responsible for every act, and every act for the whole life” (Levine 2010, p. xx).

The ‘ought’, as Silver and his colleagues explain, is part of life. It follows that “the relevant ethical question is not how norms do or do not match reality, but how a norm is living and charged with emotional energy rather than dead or dull. This means that a genuine law, Simmel argues, must require me to give my whole self, including my being and my feelings; such laws must speak to each individual as the individual he is” (Silver et al. 2007, p. 272). Life becomes the realisation of the ‘ought’, in the sense of the expression of what we, as individuals, are meant to be. The ‘lawfulness’ of the ‘ought’ needs to reach deep into the heart of the individual, without it being relativised. In the ‘individual law’, Simmel attempts a reconciliation between particularism and universalism through the notion of ‘eternal recurrence’.

Taking his cue from Nietzsche, Simmel adopts the idea of 'eternal recurrence' of existence as "the synthesis of the need for the infinite and the need for the finite" (Simmel 1907/1991, p. 176). Simmel does not subscribe to Nietzsche's idea fully, but adopts it in as far as it allows a synthesis between infinity and finitude. The normativity lies in the idea of recurrence instilling in the person the obligation of living every instant with the conscience we would have if living eternally. Simmel, explaining Nietzsche, stated: "We are responsible for our conduct in a new way, or at least we understand our responsibility differently, if we know that no moment of our life is ever over once and for all, but that we and humanity must experience it innumerable times just as we shape it now" (Simmel 1907/1991, p. 171). This is, however, based on the "persistence of the ego, which finds a new meaning and new consequences in the first instance in light of the reappearance of the same contents a second time" (Simmel 1907/1991, p. 173-174).

3.2 Ferrara and the Individual Law

Ferrara interprets the 'individual law' as "a principle of authenticity" (Ferrara 1998, p. 65). Accordingly, authenticity is not just the self-realisation of "one's needs and inclinations but also of the rest of the determinations of one's identity, including normative contents" (Ferrara 1998, p. 68). It is not a pursuit of personal wellbeing, but it includes the living out of duty. This means that even "the choice to renounce one's 'self-realization', if made and executed with reflective awareness is a choice *for* self-realization" (Ferrara 1998, p. 68).

Ferrara's sophisticated formulation of ethical authenticity is grounded in a teleological or, at least, a 'thick' conception of being human. He identifies qualities such as "coherence," "maturity," "depth," and "vitality" that suppose a high level of personal commitment and self-consciousness. This is in line with Simmel's position, which followed Nietzsche's idea of nobility. The "individual law" requires a high level of self-reflection and thus pertains to the "virtuosos" of ethics. As such, it is not a conception of ethics that can be generalised to all, but a path for the 'mystic' to follow. Ferrara's ethical authenticity is mostly concerned with personal development and assumes specific human characteristics as universally good. Thus, he seems to rely on each individual's reflexivity to reconcile divergent views.

From this perspective, it follows that our actions ought to embody our ideal or, indeed, authentic individuality. The 'ethical life' is thus conceived by Simmel "as the perfection of the individual" (Lee and Silver 2012, p. 131). Lee and Silver explain that "[E]ach individual may have her own categorical 'ought' toward which her life aspires but what that ultimate 'ought' consists in can only be a product of vigorous self-reflection on the part of this individual in conversation with others" (Lee and Silver 2012, p. 134). However, intersubjectivity does not constitute objective morality. Indeed, it does not even ensure shared moral values. Lee and Silver seek to reconcile the 'objective value' of the individual ideal with the individual's relationality. They write: "Though ethics may manifest as rights and duties between individuals, the form of ethical life is not at all limited to its social facet. A's realization of his fullest potential through a social relationship *may* contribute to B's ethical fulfilment" (Lee and Silver 2012, p. 139).

An individual's self-realisation 'may' contribute to another's self-realisation or, indeed, it may not. It may, as it is often the case, be of obstacle to another or, even, harm another. In Lee and Silver, there is an unspoken assumption of the 'good life', which only needs to be understood and lived out by people. Ethical self-realisation, just as much as Simmel's 'individual law', betrays an implicit or, in the case of Simmel, explicit assumption of nobility. Authenticity is not an enterprise for the faint-hearted, but for a selected few. This approach not only deprives the individual law of universality, but of duty. The individual might feel the duty, but they might not. If ethics has no imperative, can it really motivate to act justly? My main concern is not, however, the question of universalistic or particularistic ethics, but the conflation of authenticity with ethics, to which I turn in the next section.

4. Agonistic Pluralism and Authenticity

The implicit or explicit 'ethics of authenticity' not only fails to provide an adequate conception of the conditions and norms to facilitate moral consensus; it also normativises a particular understanding of being human, as an intellectualist inward pursuit, which pays lip service to dialogue with other 'selves'. This might be suitable for philosophers, but it will not serve the needs and wants of the general population. My intent is to formulate a concept of authenticity that is not inherently ethical, but that can be informed by ethical concerns. One that is in relation to one's interpretation of tradition, but also to wider society and culture. Thus, before I begin to construct my conception of the subject and of

authenticity, in the next chapter, I wish to motivate further my disagreement with the ethical perspective of communitarian philosophers, such as Taylor and MacIntyre. This is a concise 'normative comment' to clarify my ethical standpoint.

The only 'normative comment' I allow myself to express is a disclaimer rather than the exposition of an argument. MacIntyre is right in reaffirming the importance of tradition. However, what constitutes tradition is a very selective account of events, norms, and practices and is exclusive of dissenting voices and experiences. My interest lies in individual agency and how individuals interpret what they understand to be tradition, how they redefine its boundaries, and how they innovate it. This is based on a broadly liberal stance, which respects particularism as long as it does not deny the fundamental rights of the individual. I consider the value of individual freedom of conscience over and above the value of 'communities'. I feel communitarian thinkers take for granted their ability to be individuals and free, which is still denied to many, especially to women, including in Western liberal democracies.

For Simmel, heightened individuality was a blessing of modernity rather than a curse. In *Sociology* (1908/1950), he argued that people are more closely involved in small groups, while larger groups require structures. The distant character of the larger group frees the individual from the control of other members. Thus, the larger entity enables diversity. I value the internal diversity of groups and societies, whose interests, needs and desires compete, clash, but also coalesce. I consider liberal societies agonistic, a position similar to that of Chantal Mouffe and Norberto Bobbio. Following Bobbio (1984/1991), Mouffe

(2005) accepts that liberal institutions are essential for pluralism and that total pluralism is not possible and that the exclusion of some points of view is necessary for groups to be able to co-exist peacefully. In an agonistic society, individuals as well as communities pursue their own interests, including the search for truth. This can certainly lead to antagonism and outright conflict. It is the 'art' of political compromise that seeks to accommodate divergent interests, visions of the good, and freedoms.

Compromise, as Simmel wrote, "especially that brought about through exchange, no matter how much we think it is an everyday technique we take for granted, is one of mankind's greatest inventions" (Simmel 1908/1955, p. 115). I believe that it is in the controversies, debates and exchanges that we come to have a view of the good, question it and refine it. The 'good' is not a static category, but the fruit of what we make of our existence. Even what we may call 'shared values', as human rights might be, are interpreted differently by different people, groups and cultures. Yet, this diversity should not be taken as a sign of impoverished communities, insurmountable conflict, or a lack of a universalistic framework. Taylor's, Ferrara's and MacIntyre's promotion of particularism, be that of individuals or of groups, detached from an overarching universalistic framework, relativises all conceptions of the good (Insole 2004). This very problem is at the heart of Simmel's distinction between 18th century quantitative (universalistic) individualism and 19th century qualitative (particularistic) individualism. In the post-Enlightenment era, qualitative individualism has become a pre-eminent value. Modernity has accentuated individual's consciousness. This has resulted in the internalisation of the universal Kantian

duty and its translation into a personal conscious choice to make life meaningful, and to grow morally and spiritually.

The Christian evangelicals, in the present case study are refashioning their identity around the notion of authenticity against the background of pluralistic values, multi-faith and multicultural diversity. Christian authenticity, observed in the fieldwork, is undoubtedly ethical (cf. chapter ten). Nevertheless, the conception of authenticity I formulate avoids ethics for two reasons: firstly, to eschew the same normativism and essentialism of the thinkers mentioned in this chapter; secondly, to account for a wider meaning of authenticity. In the first instance, it needs to be reiterated that authenticity, as 'being true to oneself', includes being true to one's character, one's wellbeing, one's ideals, which is not necessarily 'good' for others. One could conceive one's authenticity in opposition to others. One could even conceive of authenticity, as informed by the 'good', but a particularistic good that might be in conflict with other conceptions of the good.

In the second instance, a wider formulation allows us to appreciate that there may be things people value, which are not necessarily concerned with ethics, or solely with ethics. For example, although Christian evangelicals, in the study, practise an ethical authenticity, they do not deem ethics as exhaustive of authenticity. Indeed, evangelicals are conscious of the fact that ethical behaviour can be found outside of religion. Authenticity, more than ethics, identifies the attempt to be true to truth, which in the present case study is identified with the example of Jesus. The truth of Jesus is, for research participants,

universal in that it can or, indeed, should be recognised by all. It is transcendent, although experienced in the immanence of everyday life.

Accordingly, my conception of authenticity develops Simmel's notion of immanent transcendence: "transcendence reveals itself as the immanent condition of life" (Simmel 1918/2010, p. 17). I interpret it, perhaps reductively in order to apply it to my empirical work as a person's sense of truth, which takes the person beyond "this one-sidedness". The concept of authenticity, here proposed, refers to a process of identity construction that is informed by one's understanding of the truth, which may or may not include a conception of the good. Truth, whilst embedded in culture, enables the person to transcend her social and personal identity. Thus, actors construct their identity in relation to a meaning-system, which may include ethical norms, but that is not exhausted by them. It follows that there cannot be authenticity outside a tradition. The human condition is one of situatedness, as MacIntyre might argue. However, contrary to MacIntyre, I do not believe that modernity has left us a fragmented society where it is impossible to hold shared values. Pluralism, with its acceptance of particularistic viewpoints, implies mutual respect, which rests on a liberal universalistic conception of the polity. It entails an agonistic conception of culture and society that need not degenerate into antagonism.

5. Conclusion

The chapter reviewed the most prominent formulations of authenticity, namely those of Taylor and Ferrara, as well as MacIntyre's thought on tradition and ethics to highlight some of the recurrent assumptions on the individual, society and ethics in much philosophical reflection. These assumptions, as mentioned in chapter two, are recurrent in sociology as well as in philosophy. They are central to a particular understanding of modernity, which, however, lacks historicism and betrays normative concerns. Normative conceptions of authenticity are underpinned by an understanding of ethics that is seemingly non-conflictual and by a teleological view of human beings. This can lead to a hierarchy of goods and qualities with little room for interpretation.

A view of the 'good life' as part of one's identity neglects the fact that not all people might be concerned with developing and pursuing an ethical ideal. Further, the conflation of character with ethics may lead to conflating moral responsibility with moral quality. In other words, without external moral norms, one's conduct might be judged simply on the basis of one's consciousness rather than actions. A 'mature' understanding of moral questions does not necessarily lead to moral actions, as many philosophers of morality have shown in their own lives. Schopenhauer (cf. chapter seven) was acutely aware of the value of compassion; yet this did not stop him from mistreating his landlady, being scornful of people around him, and being disliked by his own mother.

The concept of authenticity, I propose in the next chapter, therefore eschews ethical assumptions to avoid essentialism, but also to provide a more faithful account of the notion of authenticity, observed in the field. Authenticity is thus a process of identity construction, which is articulated in relation to tradition and one's community, but also wider society. It is a practice of being true to – what is understood to be – truth. One's identity is thus not only defined by one's social relations and individual character, but also one's understanding of truth, which, contrary to Taylor's "commitments," is not necessarily ethical or universal. This conception of authenticity rests on a tripartite systematisation of the 'self' as 'social', 'individual' and 'authentic', which is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Six

Authentic Self and Tradition

1. Introduction

Building on the previous chapter's critique of normative authenticity, I offer a formulation of authenticity as a process of identity construction. From the perspective of informants, (*emic*) authenticity is normative: it is a process of moral development at the communal and individual level. However, the thesis avoids endorsing the informants' narratives and experiences by distinguishing between *emic* and *etic* authenticity. Thus, the schema of *etic*

authenticity provides a framework for the sociological understanding of *emic* authenticity stressing the fact that the terms 'truth' and 'universal' need to be understood in relation to local narratives. The concept of authenticity, here proposed, is grounded in a relational understanding of the subject, the 'I', which counters the over individualistic assumptions of current understandings of individual religious identity and authenticity. The chapter begins by presenting a relational account of the self ('I and Thou') in three dimensions: a social self, an individual self, and a self-transcendent self. This systemisation develops Simmel's notions of self-transcendence, relationality, and individuality. The 'I and Thou' is an interpretation and development of significant notions in Simmel's relational sociology and philosophy, which privileges – what might be defined as – a Hegelian reading of Simmel's work.

This is followed by an account of the process of authenticity. The first part of the explanation stresses the distinction between authenticity and sincerity. Authenticity is an attempt at understanding 'truth', which is not limited to ethical concerns, and truth is always understood from within a tradition. This is illustrated through a reflection on dramatic art. Dramatic actors construct the identity of a character drawing on their own personalities, but also from acting styles, or traditions, and from shared patterns of behaviour. This reflection avoids a normative and essentialistic understanding of authenticity and an application in other fields, such as philosophy, politics and art, to name a few. This formulation of authenticity does not assume ethics or, indeed, belief and belonging. It is a framework for the understanding of an 'existential' identity.

The authentic identity is 'existential' in that it identifies the movement of self-transcendence of the person, the going beyond one's social context and individuality. Self-transcendence, however, need not be understood as a deep mystical encounter or philosophical reflections. 'Existential' identity results from one's social and personal dimensions and a wider horizon of truth. The wider horizon of truth may be felt as universal, however, it is always comprehended, experienced, and articulated through the particularistic narratives and symbols of one's tradition. In turn, what is considered sacred marks the boundaries of this process, as explored in the next chapter. This applies to religious tradition as much as political, artistic or philosophical traditions.

2. The 'I and Thou': a Systemisation of the Self

Drawing on Simmel's use of *Verstehen* (understanding) in social encounters, his conception of individuality, and the notion of self-transcendence, I put forward a relational systemisation of the self, which I term 'I and Thou'. The proposed 'I and Thou' schema provides an abstract model of construction of individuality in relational terms. The 'I' is conceived, at the same time, as social and individual, but also as 'self-transcending'. This systemisation is not Simmel's own classification, although Simmel refers to 'I and Thou' in positing the intrinsic relationality of human beings and of understanding. I thus employ the term to stress the relation between the individuality of the 'I' and the alterity of the 'Thou'. The focus being on the identity of the 'I', the 'Thou' represents the implied relationship that

constitutes the individual identity. I distinguish between three types of selves, to which I prefer referring as 'I' to underline their subjectivity, rather than reflexivity, and to maintain accordance with Simmel's terminology. These are: the 'social I', shaped by the social settings and social roles the person plays, where 'Thou' expresses social interaction; the 'individual I', which is specific to the person, like "a shading" (Simmel 1910, p. 382), thus distinguishable from 'Thou'; and the 'self-transcendent I', which captures the individual's attempt at transcending one's contingent and particularistic reality.

The tripartite systemisation of the 'self' is based on an understanding of the 'social I', the 'individual I' and the 'self-transcendent I' as types, for they capture the process of 'typification', or generalisation, of social interactions. Pyyhtinen (2008a) argues for an interpretation of Simmel's individuality as a 'type' and suggests three possible interpretations: "an already pre-existent model" independent of actualisation, according to which 'type' is similar to form; an individual type that needs to be created, such as an artist's peculiar 'mode of expression' which does not exhaust the person of the artist but identifies what is unique of the artist; and the individual's fulfilling of the moral 'ought' (*Sollen*) (Pyyhtinen 2008a, pp. 289-291). My choice of a tripartite schema serves the purpose of distinguishing between the individual 'type' as particularistic individuality and the universalistic horizon of self-transcendence. They are three separate but interlinked dimensions that seek to give expression to the social, individual and self-transcendent dimension of being human, as outlined below.

2.1 The 'Social I'

The individual, for Simmel, is shaped by social relations, although not exhausted by them. From social relations arise social generalisations that fix the image of the individual into a character. Accordingly, the 'I' is 'social' in the sense that emerges from and is constituted by social interactions. This should not be intended as a mere reduction of one's identity to social roles, but as a relational identity. Social interactions shape one's identity, but also create multiple typifications of the 'I' that are expressed at any given point. Human 'social' nature means that people 'act out' their persona, which is shaped by social relationships. Thus, the individual does not simply act in a social role; rather his 'personal character' is stylised in social interaction (Simmel 1908/1950, p. 48).

In the 'social dimension', the person experiences others, but also herself through typifications. When we interact we are mindful of the image we have of ourselves and relate to others according to this self-image. This changes according to the social situation in which we find ourselves and the people who participate in it. We thus form a 'picture' of ourselves and of others that captures the salient 'social information' and allows exchange. As Lichtblau explained it: "We always see the *other* only in the mirror of our own generalisations and typifications, and we gain our *self image* conversely only through a 'generalized other'" (Lichtblau 1991, p. 48, emphasis in the original). However, as Pyyhtinen suggests, Simmel's Thou should be distinguished from Mead's generalised other and other conceptions of the other as "the 'alien I' (such as the transcendental subject or the unconsciousness) with some external force (i.e. God), that is other to the I, as well as from the concept of 'otherness' employed by, say, feminist or postcolonial theory"

(Pyyhtinen 2010, p. 93). Thou is not alien to 'I', indeed, I and Thou participate in the same existence, albeit independently.

“... we experience the other person, the Thou, both as the most alien and impenetrable creature imaginable, and also as the most intimate and familiar. On the one hand, the ensouled Thou is our only peer or counterpart [*Pair*] in the universe. It is the only being with whom we can come to a mutual understanding and feel as 'one'. ... On the other hand, the Thou also has an incomparable autonomy and sovereignty. It resists any decomposition or analysis [*Auflösung*] into the subjective representation of the ego. It has that absoluteness of reality which the ego ascribes to itself” (Simmel 1918/1980, pp. 106-7).

'Thou' enables one's understanding of oneself as much as one's understanding of others depends on one's self-understanding. This self-reflective knowledge is grounded on the epistemological dimension of *Verstehen* (understanding), as originally put forward by Dilthey (1900/1972) and later employed by Simmel. Accordingly, we understand others by reflecting upon ourselves and we understand ourselves through our relations with others. *Verstehen* should not be misunderstood as empathic understanding of another's point of view, but a process of 'reconstruction' of our own as well as of others' reality (cf. chapter three). For Dilthey, I experience my own individuality “only through a comparison of myself with other people; at that point alone I become aware of what distinguishes me from others” (Dilthey 1900/1972, p. 231). We have no knowledge, argues Dilthey, of the

inner reality of others; therefore we need to 'reconstruct' the person to make sense of what we grasp.

Dilthey's notion of *Verstehen* is taken up by Simmel through the notion of the 'Thou' as understanding. 'Thou' as a category originates from experiencing "the other person or the Thou as a unified entity" (Simmel 1918/1980, p. 106). Simmel goes a step further and considers the "concept of the Thou or the other person and the concept of understanding" as expressing "the same ultimate, irreducible phenomenon of the human mind. The Thou, as we might put it, is its substance, and understanding is its function" (Simmel 1918/1980, p. 107). Understanding depends on alterity. Therefore, we understand others through ourselves, but also reconstruct the person through typifications, by creating images of others through which we relate and interact. 'Thou' as a category here stands to underline the consciousness of being associated, of being "by nature a political animal" (Simmel 1918/1980, p. 107), in the sense of being enmeshed in relationships.

The 'social self' is, therefore, the self that is conscious of associating and of being socialised (Simmel 1910, p. 377). This means that each member of a community looks at other members according to the constructs developed through the socialisation process of being part of the community. One looks at other members as 'a member of my group' (Simmel 1910, p. 380). It is the delimitation (*Begrenzung*) between individuals and between individuals and groups that ascribes clarity to collective structures (Simmel 1908/2007). Thus, the process of 'sociation', which invests others with their social place, their distance and closeness to us, "condenses" in specific patterns of social life (Simmel 1890/1982, p.

21). The more complex these patterns are, the more difficult it is to peel away all these layers and characterisations.

The process, however, is always ongoing and proceeds through subsequent and constant 'changes and reshapings' (Simmel 1910, p. 381), which prevent a complete characterisation of the individual. Thus, the individual does not become a static character, a mask imposed by social generalisations. On the contrary, Simmel's dynamic process of 'changes and reshapings' allows generalisations to be remodelled. It is this constant remodelling that prevents social interaction producing rigid characterisations of individuals. As mentioned, the fundamental principle of reality is, for Simmel, one of perpetual overcoming. Yet, it is not solely the dynamism of Life (*Leben*) that keeps individuals from being reduced to a 'mask', but personal individuality, without which social interaction would not be possible. Thus, the social 'I' does not exhaust the individual; there is an individuality that is personal.

2.2 The 'Individual I'

The individual dimension captures the distinctive character of the person, the personal side of the individual, that which is not "turned toward the group" (Simmel 1910, p. 381). The individual thus retains individuality. Social generalisations ascribe specific characteristics to the individual without ever capturing the actual self of the individual, but always painting a picture that forms a personality through which the individual engages in social relations.

“... the generalisation is always at the same time more or less than the individuality. That is, the individual is rated as in some particulars different from his actual self by the gloss imposed upon him when he is classified in a type, when he is compared with an imagined completeness of his own peculiarity, when he is credited with the characteristics of the social generality to which he belongs” (Simmel 1910, p. 381)

The social setting does not shape and absorb the individual completely, rather an “extra-social being, his temperament and the deposit of his experiences, his interests and the worth of his personality, ... gives the individual still, in every instance, for everyone with whom he is in contact, a definite shading, and interpenetrates his social picture with extra-social imponderabilities” (Simmel 1910, p. 382). It is through this individuality that the individual can come to be part of the group. Without one’s own personal side, one could not interact with others. Individuality does not arise in isolation, but through the encounter with the ‘Thou’, who recognises our individuality. ‘Thou’ enables the self to overcome its own fragmentary nature. As Simmel put it: “We are all fragments, not only of the universal man, but also of ourselves” (Simmel 1910, p. 379). Thus, the relationship of the ‘I and Thou’ poses, at the same time, “conflict ... for the human consciousness, and the first consolidation as well” (Simmel 1984, p. 153).

The 'individual I', however, is not only the characterisation of the individual arising from social interaction and through which individuals interact with each other, but also the image we have of our own 'self' which is never concretised fully. Simmel uses the term *Individualität der Eigenheit* (individuality of one's own) thus emphasising "the irreducible singularity of the individual's life" (Pyyhtinen 2010, p. 154). In contrast with quantitative individualism (*Einzelheit*) and qualitative individualism (*Einzigkeit*), which refer to generalities, the individuality of one's own (*Eigenheit*) refers to the particular concrete individual. Individuality, for Simmel, is the overcoming of the contrast between mind and body. One's own specific "soul", or mind, belongs to one's specific body, and each unfolding into each other (Simmel 1910/2003, p. 13).

The specificity of one's own individuality grants individuals an 'image' of themselves. Thus, individuality refers to our 'personality', our 'character', in the same sense in which we recognise our actions as being 'in character' or 'out of character', expressing that unity underpinning our 'fragments'. It is one's consciousness or, in Simmel's words, 'personality' that bestows a sense of coherent unity to the person. Human beings are made of physical and psychological elements held together by consciousness, which gives an image of unity. Consciousness, this unified image of the 'I', or self, does not nullify its relationality. The 'I' is the outcome of constant inner as well as outer interactions. One's relationships with the outside world and the inner workings of the mind thus shape one's psyche.

The representations of memory are an example of how the mind gives a sense of a unified 'I'; one, however, that is perpetually altered by the dynamic relationship between past and

present. Thus, the past shapes us in the present as much as the present shapes the image we have of ourselves in the past. This perpetual process prevents the realisation of the 'personality', as Simmel puts it, "in the absolute sense" (Simmel 1911/1997, p. 51). One is never complete and, therefore, seeks unity perpetually. It is this longing for unity from which the search for authenticity emerges.

2.3 The 'Self-transcendent I'

The 'self-transcendent I' is based on Simmel's idea of self-transcendence, which encapsulates the recognition of human beings being 'this side', but also their longing for 'totality'. Vandenberghe notes that Simmel "continuously hints that there is something beyond reality, something that transcends mere life, encompassing all of its moments and giving it its unity" (Vandenberghe 2010, p. 7). Vandenberghe gives a metaphysical reading of Simmel's transcendence, which reflects Kant's move from the transcendent to the transcendental (universal). Kant's transcendental enacts a shift from the transcendent God to universal consciousness. For Vandenberghe, Simmel's transcendence is immanent because it is the unity to which one's subjective consciousness aspires.

The divine is then experienced from within, shifting the emphasis from religion to religiosity, piety and spirituality (Vandenberghe 2010, p. 7). Accordingly, Simmel's religion is grounded in human consciousness, and authenticity is attained through the cosmic Thou, which encompasses the self and the other, as well as the absolute Thou. It is through Thou that "the subject can thus realize its unique identity and attain authenticity" (Vandenberghe 2010, p. 21). Similarly, Podoksik suggests that Simmelian individuality needs to be reconciled with universality or, as he puts it, totality. For Podoksik,

individuality and totality are reconciled through a “radicalization” of qualitative individualism (Podoksik 2010, p. 139). I feel Podoksik’s and Vandenberghe’s Kantian interpretation of Simmel falls prey to essentialism. This may indeed be imputed to Simmel. In his book on Michelangelo (1910/2003), Simmel refers to the “metaphysical sentiment” of the universal, from which one’s own destiny flows and from which one’s life acquires meaning (1910/2003, p. 58).

Nevertheless, in both Vandenberghe’s and Podoksik’s reading, the totality of authenticity submerges the ‘I’ under an absolute ‘Thou’. I feel it is a metaphysical understanding of Simmel’s thought that should be resisted. Simmel does not seek a unity where the particular is subsumed in the universal, but a dynamic relationship of the two. I thus propose a more Hegelian approach to stress the simultaneous presence of opposites. Hegel recovers Heraclitus’ conception of reality as becoming, unfolding in actuality, which is akin to Simmel’s *Lebensphilosophie*. For Hegel, ‘becoming’ and knowledge happen through a dialectical process. Simmel’s opposition between Forms and Life, especially in his late philosophical phase, shares Hegel’s processual conception of actuality and knowledge. Life ‘becomes’ through Forms although it never reaches absolute *Leben*.

Against Romantics, Hegel argues that the absolute cannot be grasped through immediate experience (*Erlebnis*); rather it requires mediation, which he develops in his dialectics. Accordingly, knowledge of reality goes through a process of “sublation” (*Aufhebung*) of opposites. The synthesis, or sublation (*Aufhebung*), of the opposites of thesis and antithesis is a process of overcoming (*aufheben*), which retains the opposition. The verb *aufheben*

means cancelling but also preserving, so the sublation cancels and preserves thesis and antithesis. It is not a mere union of opposites; rather the contradiction is essential to the dialectical process. The Real, understood as the Idea (*Begriff*), or logos, has in itself its own unfolding. This happens first by becoming 'objective' through alienation, which is then overcome to return to itself, not in its original state, but in a mature and developed one.

Referring to Hegel, Simmel explains that opposites come together in a higher unity, in which the sense and value of each is preserved, and so is their opposition (Simmel 1910/1996, p. 57). The absolute is multiplicity, for the opposition is not nullified. The absolute is also never detached from empirical actuality. The finite is not separate from the infinite; rather the infinite 'becomes' actual through the finite. Simmel is very sympathetic to this way of thinking. For Simmel, Michelangelo attains perfection and redemption of life in life itself, in moulding the absolute in finite form (1910/2003, p. 64). The overcoming of the dualism of body and mind, accomplished by Michelangelo in his statues, is not a placid perfection, but retains the conflict of opposites. In Christianity, the reconciliation of the internal contradictions of being happens in the transcendent; in contrast, for Hegel, the reconciliation is not outside things but in themselves in the process of overcoming the opposite through its higher form (Simmel 1910/1996, p. 58).

'Being' thus reaches itself only in the infinite path of 'becoming' (Simmel 1910/1996, p. 59). The individual, for Hegel, needs to replicate the same path of unfolding to know the 'truth'. By philosophising, one overcomes the finitude of one's consciousness and elevates the 'empirical I' to the 'transcendental I', to Reason and Spirit (*Geist*). Hegel's view of

knowledge is, I believe, useful in order to appreciate Simmel's self-transcendence and immanent transcendence. I interpret this unfolding, or becoming, of the 'I' as coming to know oneself in relation to the world. Immanent transcendence is thus a process of going beyond oneself to know oneself in a wider perspective.

This brief reference to Hegel is merely to stress the role of becoming rather than to tackle Hegel's wider oeuvre. I suggest Simmel's "immanent transcendence" ought to be understood in a dynamic sense, based on the concept of Life going beyond itself. "Life is that which at all points wants to go beyond itself, reaching out beyond itself" (Simmel, cited in Pyyhtinen 2010, p. 146). For Simmel, the individual reaches out towards an ideal authenticity that brings together not only the fragments of their own selves but also "of the universal man" (Simmel 1910 p. 379). It is a higher unity that does not dissolve the inner contradictions. It is the development of one's individuality. I understand this as a process of identity construction by widening one's horizon of understanding of oneself and the world around. This may have an ethical component, but it is not essential to it.

Grounding the search of authenticity on self-transcendence means that the self is not made complete by a static unity. On the contrary, "transcendence reveals itself as the immanent condition of life" (Simmel 1918/2010, p. 17). Thus, authenticity is not merely the realisation of what is distinctive of the person, the individual uniqueness, rather it captures the person's self-transcendence. The 'self-transcendent I' expresses an individuality that transcends the individual. It is a search for reconciliation of the particular individual with truth, i.e. what is felt as going beyond the 'here and now'. Truth is understood within the

framework of one's tradition, which is not confined to religion, but can include philosophy, art, politics, as mentioned. It is also not necessarily ethical or applicable universally, although it may be understood thus by the agent. It captures what the actor understands as truth, which is refracted through the language, ideas and practices of tradition. It may be considered universal, but it must be grasped through culturally specific mediations and representations. Accordingly, it is a process of identity construction inscribed within one's frames of reference.

Simmel did not use the term authenticity; rather he theorised individuality stressing identity. Authentic, from the Greek *authentikós*, originally meant having authority over oneself. Modern authenticity tends to be associated with the Shakespearean verse "to thine own self be true"¹², uttered by Polonius in *Hamlet*, which has given the word a more pronounced sense of being in accordance with one's character (Guignon 2004). The accordance with one's character is often understood as ethical thus betraying an understanding of authenticity as being in accordance with one's 'better' self rather than oneself. Simmel has a normative approach and conceives of the development of one's individuality as an ethical task (*sittliche Aufgabe*) (Pyyhtinen 2010, p. 137). The term *Sittlichkeit*, employed by Hegel, is the noun deriving from the adjective *sittlich*, which means customary, deriving from *Sitte* (custom). Thus, the individual law is ethical and represents Simmel's attempt at combining individuality with a universalistic ethic. He sought to reconcile the individual with the universal in his concept of the individual law (cf. chapter five).

¹² Act 1, Scene 3, *Hamlet*.

In addition, notwithstanding the individual law being the ethical pursuit of the individual, Simmel has a relational understanding of ethics. Duty is not just abiding by ethical principles (as in Kant) but responsibility to a specific you. Morality (*Sittlichkeit*) is, for Simmel, of “an altruistic-social nature” (Simmel 1908/1950, p. 260). The definition of the moral is “the devotion of the ‘I’ to the ‘thou’ (in the singular or plural)” (Simmel 1908/1950, p. 260), from which flow philosophical doctrines of ethics. However, in recognition of contemporary pluralism and my understanding of ethics as agonistic, my intent is to avoid a conflation of authenticity with ethics. Thus, I propose a conception of authenticity as a process, where one’s conception of truth, however understood by the actor, is interpreted through one’s understanding of tradition, be it philosophical, artistic, or religious tradition, to name a few. Authenticity thus reflects the dynamism of Life, the continuous search for one’s knowledge of oneself and the world around in a wider perspective. This may include personal moral development; it may also bring one to an antagonistic understanding of the world and violent action.

3. The Process of Authenticity

The pursuit of authenticity is grounded on a continually self-transcending process. I interpret the notion of self-transcendence to include the adoption of a wider horizon of truth, which may be understood as universal. It is thus a transcendence of one’s social

conditioning ('social I') and of one's personal perspective ('individual I') to tend towards universality. 'Tending' (*streben*) is characteristic of the Romantic Movement, but also of Hegel's and Simmel's conception of the individual. Human beings can transcend themselves through their awareness of being 'this side'. This need not be a deep mystical experience or philosophical insight, but a process of understanding of oneself and the world around. *Emic* authenticity, emerging from my informants' narratives, is trying to "be like Jesus". It is a doing articulated communally as seeking to create an inclusive church (cf. chapter eight), individually as seeking to be true to one's 'better' self (cf. chapter nine), and universally as incarnating compassion (cf. chapter ten). *Etic* authenticity is a process of constructing one's identity by seeking to grasp – what is understood as – truth intellectually, emotionally and in practice. The identity results from the person's attempt at being true to her understanding of truth. This is further explained in section four.

In this section, I want to reflect on the search for authenticity not being confined to morality. To illustrate this point, I draw from reflections on dramatic art. Dramatic acting allows me to draw a distinction between sincerity and authenticity (in contrast with Taylor and Trilling); to emphasise the processual and multidimensional nature of the concept, which does not solely depend on the subject, but is in dynamic relation with others and one's interpretation of tradition; and to espouse a concept of truth experienced through the particularism of individuality and culture. Accordingly, authenticity in acting refers to the process of conveying what is felt to be true about being human through the particularism of the actor, the story, the character, but also of the acting tradition, such as that of Stanislavski, Brecht or Artaud, to name a few. To an actor, a specific acting tradition might

feel truer than another. Acting traditions presuppose specific interpretations of what is truly human, which may or may not be supported by empirical evidence.

There is nothing moral or immoral about an acting style. The dramatic actor expresses authenticity through the language of the style he or she values. For Simmel, dramatic art is not merely a convincing and emotional representation of reality; rather representation is only the first step the actor takes to transform their internal reality and the reality given in the play into a work of art (Simmel 1911/1968, p. 95). I build on this notion to provide an example of authenticity through the art of dramatic acting. The actor's individuality is always present in dramatic representation. It is the source of the emotions used to animate the character, but also one's manner of speaking and moving. The actor's authenticity in dramatic art, however, does not lie solely in the projection of his or her personal feelings onto the character; rather it also rests on capturing something that may be deemed universal of humanity, which can be recognised by the audience. The conception of humanity is, however, always mediated by the actor's social and individual identity; by the actor's dramatic tradition, which provides interpretations of human characteristics and a repertoire of how to express them; and by the cultural and philosophical underpinnings of the play or script. For instance, the portrayal of mental illness may be informed by previous cinematic and theatrical representations, by the actor's observation and wider cultural influences.

Authenticity, in dramatic acting, is thus not the elimination of the actor's personal characteristics to replicate naturalistically a character in the story, but the portrayal of –

what are seen as – (universal) human traits through the actor's individual and social identity. The actor, but also the author and director, have an understanding of human traits, on which basis they build a character. Therefore, humanity is performed through the construction of a character by the actor and director. Authenticity is thus more than the originality, or distinctiveness of the actor. Actors are not simply faithful to their individuality nor are they solely representing the individuality of a character, but adding a further dimension of 'truth', to which the audience can relate. An actor's distinctiveness is part of the process of authenticity, for the self-transcendent aspect of authenticity requires it be expressed through the particularism of the actor's individuality and that of the character.

However, when actors are true only to their own, or to their character's distinctive characteristics, the acting crystallises in their distinctive manner of speaking and moving and results in mannerism. The actors, just as much as non-actors, are thus affected in their speaking and moving. Actors need to go beyond their own distinctiveness and that of the characters they are portraying to convey the human experience, in which the audience can participate. This is independent of the sympathy that a character or an actor might arouse or not. Dramatic art needs to induce empathy, an understanding of the reality being represented, but not necessarily sympathy¹³. Simmel wrote that acting is a crystallisation of a "spiritual reality" (Simmel 1911/1968, p. 95). I interpret this to mean that acting gives form to what is understood as true humanity by the actor, director, author, and by the audience. As mentioned, this may or may not be empirically founded. Thus, rather than

¹³ I am grateful to Dr Andrew Edgar for suggesting this distinction between empathy and sympathy in relation to dramatic art.

being essentialistic, this conception of authenticity allows sociological empirical discovery to inform its contents.

Authentic acting illustrates that authenticity is more than sincerity. Actors are not simply 'being themselves', they are not, strictly speaking, sincere; rather they are pretending. The 'pretence' of dramatic art, however, is a means through which – what is perceived as – the universally human is expressed through the particularism of a character. It is also expressed through the language and repertoire of meaning of acting styles and traditions. An acting tradition carries with itself an array of notions over human nature and how to represent it (realistically, naturalistically, ironically etc.). Actors' authenticity thus rests in the attempt of portraying what they or, for that matter, the author or director, see as universal of human beings. The universality that transcends the particular is always conveyed through the contingent attributes of a character, the personality and interpretative performance of the actor. Authenticity rests on that effort of conveying universalism through particularism.

The example of dramatic acting affords the possibility of conceiving authenticity as an attempt at being true to – what is seen as – transcendent of contingent reality and, yet, expressed through the particularism of the actor, the story and character. The 'universal', to which actors aspire, the 'truth' of human nature is not necessarily ethical, but a mere portrait of humanity, as understood within a specific cultural frame of reference. Thus, dramatic acting shows an articulation of authenticity that is neither normative nor essentialistic. The search for authenticity is thus informed by the social and individual

dimensions of the actor, the cultural specificity of the story, of the character and the actor's artistic tradition. Authenticity is a multidimensional process, for it is articulated by the actor being true to his/her individual identity, to the acting tradition of choice, and to what is understood as truth of the reality being represented.

Thus, authenticity is the attempt at reconciling universal truth (transcendental) with the particular: the actor seeks to portray – what he/she understands as – universal human nature through the particularism of a character and the actor's own personal characteristics. The social dimension of the actor, of the author and of the director, includes the shared notions regarding human nature held by a particular acting tradition. The search for authenticity encapsulates the tension between particularism and universalism. The universal, however, is always understood and performed within a particular framework of meaning. Authenticity is always inscribed within a tradition, be it a religion, an acting tradition, or other cultural framework.

4. Authenticity and Tradition

The systemisation of the 'I and Thou' provides a relational conception of individuality. The person is situated and embedded in social relations. The 'I' is always in relation with others, with one's individuality, but also with an inherited and/or chosen tradition. My understanding of tradition encompasses philosophical, political and artistic traditions,

among others. The present thesis examines individuals embedded in an inherited and chosen religious tradition. However, as the example of dramatic acting showed, the search for authenticity can occur in other fields. The political, philosophical or artistic worldviews, which illumine, guide and challenge politicians, philosophers and artists in their ‘cultural productions’, constitute traditions. Thus, a literary or musical style, a film genre or directorial cut, a style of acting, are not simply tools of a craft, but constitute a tradition, for they are enmeshed with meaning and values. Artistic styles, just as much as religious rituals, are not mere tools of communication; rather they are part of a meaning system. The search for grasping the truth is couched within tradition, but also ensures tradition is a body of knowledge and practices that are interpreted and lived out in one’s daily life today.

4.1 Religious Authenticity in Three Dimensions

The religious person seeking authenticity is engaged in the process of interpreting and constructing religious tradition. I identify religious tradition with a body of religious symbols, rituals, laws, customs, beliefs and narratives associated with a religion regardless of their ‘official’ status. I argue that legitimacy derives from what is felt to be authentic by the group and individual religious actors (cf. chapter seven). Authenticity is thus an attempt at being true to – what actors understand as – truth. Truth has a social dimension, which is informed by one’s social and cultural context; an individual dimension, informed by one’s self-understanding; and a self-transcendent dimension, informed by one’s sense of a universal horizon. The social dimension of authenticity reflects the values from the group’s social context and identity, but also a critique of social *mores*. For instance, to

anticipate the discussion of the empirical chapters, the construction of Bethlehem church as inclusive and caring is seen as 'being authentic' in community, showing how church members construct the communal identity of the church.

The individual dimension indicates that truth needs to be in conformity with the self of the individual. It needs to 'make sense' to the person individually, affecting them emotionally and intellectually. It is, however, not simply experiential, it is not limited to what people find 'moving' or what resonates with their way of thinking; rather it results from the emotional and intellectual interpretation of tradition. Finally, the self-transcendent dimension of authenticity refers to the attempt to tap into – what is understood as – universal truth. In this case study, the truth of Jesus is considered by informants as universally valid. The self-transcendent dimension, in this case study, is born out of belief as *belief in*, trust in God, which leads to a relationship with God and others. Such a relationship prompts the person to live in accordance with the truth, as they understand it, in their everyday life.

The attempt to be authentic is sustained by the actor's interpretation of tradition to make sense in changed social circumstances, in one's life, and within a universal horizon. The process of authenticity, therefore, entails interpretation of tradition, to be relevant for today and consonant with what actors perceive to be timeless truth. Here, universality stresses the search for a wider horizon of truth that is not simply the expression of a cultural identity or social status, but that is valid for humanity as a whole. For example, my informants see Jesus as a revolutionary figure breaking free from traditional hierarchical

religion and inspiring them to do the same today. Therefore, ‘enemies’ of Jesus today are found in what is dubbed “traditional religion” (cf. chapter eight), which stifles the believer’s inner search for truth. To be like Jesus requires being true to oneself, such as expressing one’s religious sentiment in a way that ‘rings true’ to one, but also being true to ‘something bigger’ and act accordingly.

Truth may include ethical norms, which are the fruit of an interpretation of ethics from within a tradition; so it is always through a particularistic filter. Authenticity is articulated through practices, which may be valued, but are not necessarily ethical. Practices such as praying, fasting, singing, and celebrating festivals are not ‘ethical’ in and of themselves, that is, they are ‘ethically neutral’. They might be of mental or physical benefit for the practitioner, but they are not inherently moral acts. This non-normative conception of authenticity leaves open the possibility of different ethical perspectives and understandings of the good that are negotiated and practised in everyday life.

Within this framework, I propose religiosity as a sensitivity to self-transcendence, which is not confined to religious forms. I base this construction on religiosity being a “*life process*” (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 209, emphasis in the original), which is required to transcend itself to acquire a Form in order to find expression and on – what Simmel calls – a “progressive development” (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 210), whereby religion acquires a “more purely religious form” (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 210). Thus, religiosity gives rise to a process, whereby religion becomes a Form. Further, in *Ethik und Probleme der modernen Kultur* (1913/2004), Simmel reflected on the framing of the religious question, following the

Enlightenment, as a question regarding the concrete truth of a supernatural reality. Accordingly, either there is a supernatural reality or faith is but a subjective fantasy (1913/2004, p. 44). Simmel opposed to this view a 'third' option: faith itself may be something metaphysical.

Accordingly, the transcendent lies in 'believing', in "the *process* of faith" (1913/2004, p. 44, emphasis in the original). This is, for Simmel, not merely subjective for the subject is objective. It is being religious that is transcendent, metaphysical and objective (1913/2004, p. 45). I stretch these reflections to interpret religiosity as a sensitivity to self-transcendence. Self-transcendent religiosity, the sensitivity to truth, may be inscribed within the religious frame and expressed through it, although it is not confined to it. In the present study, the self-transcendent religiosity of participants is articulated through the narrative of 'following Jesus', proper to the local tradition. Religiosity is thus not belief and/or belonging, nor is it moral conduct, but a sensitivity to self-transcendence, which can be more or less deep and which is expressed in everyday practices.

Understandings of religion as belief or relation to the transcendent fail to appreciate that 'immanent religiosity' has often been present within traditional religious forms. Arguably, most religious practices and rituals seek to make the transcendent immanent. The incarnation of Christ, in Christianity, is an example of the transcendent God moving into the immanent world. In Judaism, the welcoming of the *Shekinah*, the immanent presence of God, at the start of the Sabbath is another example of the transcendent participating in the immanent world. This suggests that immanence and transcendence are not in opposition,

but in dynamic relationship. Accordingly, I propose that the religious framework, rather than inserting the person in a transcendent perspective, 'makes sense' of the person's self-transcendence.

Authenticity is, hence, not just a search for replicating what is seen as normative of tradition, which in the present case is early Christianity, nor yet is it a modernising of tradition to be relevant to the individual today; rather it is a linking of individual reality to what is perceived to be truth through the prism of tradition. Authenticity is a process of constructing one's identity on the basis of one's conception of truth, which may be understood as universalistic, but is articulated through the particularity of one's tradition. The process requires personal participation and interpretation on the part of individual actors. Authenticity implies that one is no mere follower of religious customs, or artistic style, but an interpreter and a 'doer'. The person engages in the process of authenticity by employing the 'tools' in the repertoire for her own tradition. Thus, the person is in relation to tradition and tradition 'lives' through the person.

5. Conclusion

The concept of authenticity, proposed in this chapter, is founded on a relational understanding of the person, as systematised through the 'I and Thou'. Authenticity is, therefore, a process, rather than an ideal. Specifically, it is a process of identity construction

that is in dynamic relation with one's interpretation of tradition. This perspective stresses the agency of the religious actor in interpreting tradition to make sense of their self-transcendence. This should not be taken in a functionalist sense, identifying religion as a social construct to respond to the needs of humanity. The focus, from a sociological point of view, is decidedly on the human and the human construction of the sacred. Nevertheless, the theory does not dismiss the standpoint of the religious person, by which I mean the person of *Religiosität*.

A possible universal truth, here, is not denied; rather it is considered as comprehensible through the particularism of one's experience and culture. This conception underlines the subjective dimension of truth, which needs to ring true to oneself and be in accordance with one's personality. It is also social, for it is informed by social relations, and self-transcendent, pointing to what is seen as 'bigger', or 'beyond', and understood as truth. Truth, however, is always refracted in the plurality of traditions, be they philosophical, artistic or religious. Accordingly, religious tradition, as interpreted and practiced by religious actors, constitutes the framework for the understanding and articulation of truth.

Contra Simmel's own thought on individuality, I put forward a concept of authenticity, which may include ethical concerns, but is not exhausted by them. This is to respond to my participants' understanding of 'being a Christian' as being more than an ethical pursuit (cf. chapter nine and ten). It is also based on a conception of society as agonistic, albeit not necessarily antagonistic, where multiple ethical perspectives are practised in everyday life. It avoids abstract substantialist conception of being human in favour of empirical

discovery. The next chapter explores the boundary-making of authenticity by religious actors. It is argued that the sacred is constituted by what are understood by actors to be the confines of authenticity, which are not decided solely by religious authorities; rather they are interpreted and legitimised by individual actors.

Chapter Seven

Religion, Legitimacy, and Ethics

1. Introduction

In chapter four, I outlined how religiosity (*Religiosität*), for Georg Simmel, was a sensitivity, an attitude, a way of being, which shapes how a person experiences and lives life. This conception of religiosity distinguishes between the religious sentiment and religious expression. Thus, this sentiment need not be manifested in the religious behaviour of established traditions. I have interpreted religiosity as a mode of consciousness, which orders one's life and thus gives rise to an 'existential' identity. The person is a religious person, experiencing life religiously. Simmel described spiritual life as a continuous quest for God. However, it is in the quest itself that the goal is achieved (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 171-172). I thus feel that we can construct religiosity as a sensitivity to self-transcendence, as outlined in this thesis. This means that it is not limited to – what is generally recognised as – religious or spiritual behaviour, but may include other fields of human experience, such as philosophy, politics and art.

It was mentioned in chapter four, that the person expresses her religiosity, including experiencing the relationship with the divine, through her group and in the language of her tradition. Tradition, here, comprehends not only the historical construction of a religion, but all the narratives, ideas, and practices in which religious people participate. Tradition is “lived religion” (Hall 1997; Ammerman 1997; Orsi 2003; McGuire 2008), rather than solely official theological doctrines. Therefore, the emphasis is on the individuals’ agency in constructing their own tradition and, above all, legitimising it. This work of attribution of value and legitimisation constructs the sacred, which is not an *a priori* category. It is, rather, constituted of itself in the sense that it is what marks an identity, it is “what we do/think as Christians”, as participants might say. It is the fruit of religious people’s ‘sacralisation’, whereby the person identifies with tradition and attributes value to the components of the tradition, such as specific ideas, symbols and practices, thus constituting the sacred. The attribution of value does not necessarily mean that the ideas, symbols and practices, which are objects of the sacralisation, are invested with ‘magical’ power, although it may in some cases.

Contrary to other interpretations, I do not identify the sacred with the numinous (Otto 1917/1924), nor do I consider it as what is considered ‘good’ within a given culture and society (Lynch 2012). It may include practices that are ‘ethically neutral’, as in the case of praying. Most importantly, the ethics, which may underpin instances of sacralisation, is not to be taken as applicable universally. The ethical standards professed by a community might indeed be in contrast with those of the wider community. Sacralisation marks the confines of an identity considered authentic, which is not limited to ethics. This can be

found in the divergent views over the place of environmental concerns in Christianity, evidenced in chapter ten, where all participants agree with environmental ethics, but not all considered them an authentic part of Christianity. Sacralisation thus limits the boundaries of authenticity, which depend on the interpretation of tradition by individuals as well as by religious authorities. Authenticity, in the present case study, is identified with 'following Jesus', which is fundamentally ethical, but also it is identified with a particular form of ethic: the 'ethic of compassion'. The second part of the chapter constructs the distinction between the 'ethic of purity' and the 'ethic of compassion' to aid the analysis of the ethical reasoning at Bethlehem. The next sections build on the systemisation and expansion I have provided so far of Simmel's sociology to propose the process of sacralisation.

1. The Term 'Sacralisation'

The term sacralisation has been employed in a variety of contexts. Historian Emilio Gentile (2000) develops this concept on the basis of his studies of totalitarian political movements. Sacralisation, for Gentile, refers to politics acquiring a "religious dimension" (Gentile 2000, p. 22). Thus, the sacralisation of politics takes place "when politics is conceived, lived and represented through myths, rituals and symbols that demand faith in the sacralised secular entity, dedication among the community of believers" (Gentile 2000, p. 21). Religion, for Gentile, is a system of beliefs and myths that define values and ethics. Gentile explains that

fascism “constructed its own system of beliefs, myths, and rituals, centred on the sacralisation of the state”; yet its totalitarian nature and politics meant that fascism became “an all-consuming existence” (Gentile 1990, p. 230).

Gentile’s political religion gives meaning to the person. He writes that fascists were united not by “a doctrine but an attitude, an *experience of faith*” (Gentile 1990, p. 234, emphasis in the original). This latter aspect echoes unwittingly Simmel’s definition of religiosity as an attitude pointing to the affinity between politics and religion in – what may be described in Simmelian language as – their totalising force. Gentile’s work has primarily a “macro-level” focus. He thus provides a valuable account of the relationship between religion and politics, and the use of beliefs, myths and rituals in the sacralisation of politics, albeit leaving unexplored the individual dimension of religion and the role of individuals in constructing the sacred.

Sacralisation is also mentioned in relation to the phenomenon of ‘fandom’ (Jindra 2005 and 1994). Jindra argues that Star Trek ‘fandom’ can be considered a religious phenomenon due to the sacralisation of elements of culture, the formation of communities, a canon and a hierarchy. Sacralisation here entails “deep-seated American beliefs about the nature of humankind, the world and its future, and encourages the practices that parallel religious processes of codifying, forming a community and developing institutions to guide its practices” (Jindra 1994, p. 50). It thus seems to be based on beliefs and belonging, although there is no reflection on how fandom sacralisation affects one’s identity construction and everyday practices. The wider phenomenon of celebrity is instead understood as a cult of

the individual (Rothenbuhler 2005) and a projection of a desire, rather than identification with the celebrity and identity construction.

In psychology of religion, sacralisation is concerned almost exclusively with the individual. Psychologists conceive of religion as an all-encompassing meaning system (Silberman 2005, Park 2005a and 2005b, Paloutzian 2005), which orients the religious person in how to understand life and organise values according to religious notions. For Pargament, religion “has to do with building, changing, and holding on to the things people care about in ways that are tied to the sacred” (Pargament 1997, p. 32). Accordingly, sacralisation explains why activities, such as teaching or giving food to the homeless become ‘ministering’, when performed as service to God, and are thus understood differently from the same activities performed as a secular task (Pargament 1997, p. 211).

Emmons and Crumpler (1999) distinguish between “sacralization” as “a process of imbuing external objects with sacred qualities”, and “sanctification” as “an inner process of transformation” (Emmons and Crumpler 1999, p. 18). Sanctification corresponds to “a process by which personas are made pure or holy. Sanctification thus refers to moral purity or moral goodness (literally, ‘saint-like’)” (Emmons and Crumpler 1999, pp. 18-19). This notion of sanctification reflects the Protestant idea of sanctification by the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit begins a process of perfecting the believer once the believer has accepted God in their life. Consequently, it applies a very particularistic lens on individual experience; it assumes that there is such a state or quality of “moral purity,”

disregarding the complexity and contested nature of ethics; and it conflates the sensation of being cleansed with “moral purity”.

The application of the psychological notion of sacralisation in different contexts shows the concrete effects of the attribution of sacred meaning to objects, events, and ideas. Thus, bargaining based on economic incentives during conflict resolution negotiations or which affects symbolical state policies, tends to backfire when it disregards sacred meaning (Fiske and Tetlock 1997; Dehghani et al. 2009 and 2010). In sociology of religion, Hans Mol (1976) proposed an understanding of religion as the sacralisation of identity. Accordingly, individuals and groups have a need for identity, understood as “a stable niche in a predictable environment” (1976, p. 55) to counter the process of differentiation of modernity. Sacralisation grounds and strengthens identity by projecting on it a feeling of awe.

Mol’s functionalist approach presumes religion to be beneficial to individuals, groups and society by providing cohesion thus neglecting the diversity of religious expressions, especially disruptive or violent religion (Smith 1996). In contrast, the concept I propose sees sacralisation as a process of identification of religious actors with their religious tradition and their attribution of value to beliefs and practices by inscribing them into the religious framework. The process of sacralisation is critical to the construction and legitimisation of religious tradition on the part of individuals and the group. This identification and value attribution constitutes the sacred, thus providing boundaries to what is considered authentic.

3. The Process of Sacralisation

Religion, for Simmel, is a language (Oakes 1980, p. 10), a schema through which the religious person understands the world around her. Accordingly, the religious person understands herself and her everyday life religiously. I propose to understand religiosity as sensitivity to self-transcendence, which involves transcending one's social and individual background to live 'religiously'. It may be a deep mystical experience or, more simply, a specific mind-set over one's understanding of life. The mind-set of 'going beyond' the 'here and now' calls for action. The experience or sense of 'immanent transcendence' needs to be lived out in everyday reality. The search for authenticity is the search for expressing religiosity. This can include the adoption of a specific diet, such as Jewish *kashrut* and Muslim *halal*, or the performance of specific activities, like Christian ministering and Jewish *mitzvot*.

There may be multiple reasons for adhering to a religious lifestyle. Focusing on the individual agency, we can glimpse at how individuals attribute value to a lifestyle, to ideas and symbols in the construction of their identity. The identification of a person with a way of being religious brings about the attribution of value and legitimisation to one's interpretation of tradition. I ground sacralisation in the following concepts: religiosity; religion's *belief in*; and religion's totalising force. I propose to understand religiosity (*Religiosität*), as a mode of consciousness, from which a religious paradigm ensues. Such paradigm has a totalising force (*Totalisierungsvermögen*), in the sense of ordering one's world view. As mentioned in chapter four, I link Simmel's claim that human beings project

their own qualities and hopes onto the people near them, their country, and “the gods” with ‘belief in’ (trust).

The attitude of trust, which for Simmel is typical of religion, cements people’s projections of feelings onto others, their tradition, and the divine. This results in a form of idealisation, elicited by the totalising force of religiosity. Just as people idealised others or their country, as proposed by Simmel, by projecting their hopes and ideas onto others and their country; here, religious actors project their religious sentiment, ideas and hopes onto their tradition sacralising it. The projection of religious actors’ aspirations onto their tradition is dependent on the level of their identification with it. The intensity of the process of sacralisation reflects one’s religiosity, which, as conceived by Simmel, is present in people in varying degrees. Therefore, it can be of deep significance or more superficial, depending on the degree of religiosity of the person. Consequently, religious actors vary in how they ascribe value to religious ideas and practices.

As mentioned, Simmel’s religiosity is not confined to religious behaviour belonging to a recognised tradition, but has blurred boundaries. Simmel, however, does not explain whether the totalising force is a characteristic of religiosity (*Religiosität*) or religion (*Religion*). I interpret the totalising force as an aspect of religion, the world view to which religiosity has given expression. Accordingly, the ensuing world view is not limited to established religious traditions, but to philosophical, artistic, political traditions, to name a few. Most importantly, sacralisation rests with the individual, who legitimises religious practices and ideas of tradition. This approach to sacralisation emphasises the role of

individual religious actors in engaging with their tradition by interpreting and innovating its beliefs and practices. They participate in the making of their religious tradition by following or subverting the prescription of religious authorities.

Further, sacralisation is grounded on practice. Religious actors are thus practitioners who inscribe their actions within their tradition and attribute value to them. Even the Protestant notion of 'personal conviction' is 'canonised' through practice as much as belief. Membership in a church and serving are examples of practices through which believers sacralise their 'personal conviction'. Sacralisation is thus the identification with tradition, which inscribes oneself, one's beliefs and practices within the religious framework. This results in attributing value to the components of religion, which are seen as authentic, and their legitimisation. Sacralisation, which accounts for only the contribution of individual actors in legitimising tradition, does not happen in a vacuum, but within the web of social relationships the person inhabits.

The religious framework is moulded by social norms, customs and roles. Religion is not a separate sphere from society; rather religious actors reflect their social embeddedness in their interpretations of tradition. Therefore, the theological, personal, cultural and social background of the individual informs the process of sacralisation. Equally, this process happens within the religious group's hierarchies and structures. Some members of a group have official or unofficial authority and thus hold more influence. It is, therefore, important to explore those dynamics. However, sacralisation stresses the fact that the definition and legitimisation of religious tradition is not confined to religious authorities. Finally,

sacralisation is not necessarily ethical. For instance, the sacralisation of fasting is not in itself ethical, although it might aid reflection on ethical concerns, such as overconsumption in the West and wealth inequality.

Religion should not be conflated with ethics. Religious (and non-religious) traditions have ethical principles, but these are a component of tradition, which cannot be reduced to ethics. For instance, religious actors might value and follow a dietary or dress code without understanding it as ethical. A case in point can be found in Judaism, where diet norms, *kashrut*, have been justified by major Jewish philosophers and biblical interpreters on the basis of different reasoning. Accordingly, for Saadia Gaon the rationale behind *kashrut* was the rejection of animal worship (Isaacs 1996, p. 27), whilst for Moses Maimonides were health concerns and for Nahmanides *kashrut* was beneficial to the soul (Jacobs 1997, p. 127). Although a minority, prominent modern orthodoxy philosophers went as far as rejecting altogether the ethical justification for the whole of the Jewish legal system (*halachah*).

Yeshayahu Leibowitz claimed that at the heart of Judaism is not an ethical theory but the “recognition of a system of precepts as binding” (Leibowitz 1992, p. 3). Similarly, for Joseph Soloveitchik Judaism was a “total way of life” requiring the “surrender of human rationality and the sacrifice of one’s human ethical sense” (Hartman 1985, p. 89). Leibowitz and Soloveitchik were reacting to the development of universalistic ethics in modern times and affirming the particularity of the Jewish tradition by stressing the theocentric nature of the legal system. In recent times, perhaps the most interesting development has been the rise

in 'eco-kashrut' (Waskow 1992; Kusnetz 2012; Goldberg 2013) demanding ethical criteria, such as food sustainability and workers' rights, to be included as part of *kashrut*, with organisations, such as Magen Tzedek¹⁴ and Hazon¹⁵ issuing certification of ethical standards. Thus, following *kashrut* may have different rationales within the same denomination or group.

Equally, practices such as praying, fasting, singing, and celebrating festivals are not inherently 'ethical'. They are, as an Israeli singer put it, the 'pilates of the soul'¹⁶. They may harness one's concentration and mindfulness of religious ethical principles, but are not moral practices in themselves. How religious ideas, norms, and customs are interpreted and put into practice will vary depending on one's personal aptitude and social relationships. As such, it can lead to moral or immoral actions. Further, there may be different approaches and interpretations of ethics within the same religious tradition. Thus, when ideas and practices pertaining to ethics are sacralised, these should not be taken as inherently 'good' or applicable universally. Accordingly, religious actors may inscribe violent action within the religious framework bestowing on it legitimacy. The next section, therefore, explores an initial distinction between different forms of ethics. I suggest a distinction between the 'ethic of purity' and the 'ethic of compassion' to reflect my own empirical findings and of those of other studies. This is supported by the development of Simmel's thoughts on Schopenhauer and on love, as outlined below.

¹⁴ <http://www.magentzedek.org/>

¹⁵ <http://www.hazon.org/resource/kosher-sustainable-meat/>

¹⁶ Kobi Oz, Limmud Festival 2010

4. The Ethic of Compassion

In his book *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* (1907/1991), Simmel contrasts Nietzsche's pity with Schopenhauer's compassion. For Schopenhauer, compassion means transcending individual division by sympathising with another. The "individual subject identifies itself with all of the others" (Simmel 1907/1991, p. 106). In contrast, Nietzsche interprets *Mitleid* as pity, which can involve manipulation by the pitied of the pitier (Cartwright 1984, pp. 85-86), but also helping others may increase the feeling of superiority the pitier feels towards the pitied (Cartwright 1984, p. 88). For Schopenhauer, "compassion for the suffering of sentient beings was the basis for actions having moral worth" (Cartwright 1984, p. 92). According to Simmel, Schopenhauer's view is based on the discovery of the subject that individuation is but an illusion concealing that someone else's suffering is ultimately one's own (Simmel 1907/1991, p. 110). Thus, compassion is based on the recognition of the unity of all being.

Morality, for Schopenhauer, is only the alleviation of suffering (Guyer 2012, p. 405). Compassion (*Mitleid*) is thus "a desire for another's well-being" (Cartwright 1988, p. 561). Cartwright explains that Schopenhauer identifies wellbeing (*Wohl*) as 'good' and misfortune (*Wehe*) as 'bad' (Cartwright 1988, p. 561). Compassion alleviates suffering thus bestowing moral worth to action. Compassion comes from "... the immediate *participation* (*Theilnahme*), independent of all ulterior considerations, primarily in the *suffering* of another, and thus in the prevention or elimination of it.... Only insofar as an action has

sprung from compassion does it have moral value; and every action resulting from any other motives has none." (Schopenhauer, cited in Cartwright 1988, p. 561, emphasis in the original). Compassion is "the fundamental incentive of all genuine, i.e., disinterested, justice and lovingkindness" (Schopenhauer 1839/1995, p. 187) for it is based on the identification of the subject with another.

"I nevertheless *feel it with him, feel it as my own*, and not *within me*, but *in another person*... But this presupposes that to a certain extent I have identified myself with the other man, and in consequence the barrier between the ego and the non-ego is for the moment abolished; only then do the other man's affairs, his need, distress, and suffering, directly become my own" (Schopenhauer 1839/1995, pp. 165-166, emphasis in the original)

In *Nietzsche and Kant* (1906/2008), Simmel explains that for Schopenhauer compassion constitutes the substance of all morality for it is the intimate and immediate form of solidarity among people, which is rejected by Nietzsche (1906/2008, p. 106). For Nietzsche, there is a natural distance between people (Simmel 1907/1991, p. 147), which should not be overcome. Simmel grounds his ethics in the individual law (cf. chapter five), which is not developed in conjunction with his thoughts on love and compassion. He is uneasy with the implication of Schopenhauer's grounding of compassion in the lack of individuation. Contrary to his student, Martin Buber (1923/1970), who will later interpret the 'I and Thou' as a unity and ground for ethics, Simmel resists this lack of differentiation.

This is because, for Simmel, the “absolute unity of essence dissolves not only an independent ‘thou’, but also the ‘I’” (Simmel 1907/1991, p. 111).

In Simmel, the distinction between ‘I and Thou’ is affirmed rather than dissolved. It is, once again, in the relationality that we find morality, in the responsibility for a Thou. Accordingly, “the zenith of morality is reached when relations among human beings evince simultaneously full duality and full unity: a moral occurrence is just one in which duality is not permitted to disappear in the quest for unity” (Simmel 1907/1991, p. 116). This is reiterated in his fragment *On Love* (1984).

“The existential will of the I flows to the Thou with complete intimacy. It does not need a bridge, which separates just as it connects. Nevertheless, the dynamic at stake here is different from the metaphysical unity of all being as such, from which Schopenhauer, for example, derives charity and sacrifice. This is precisely the miracle of love. It does not nullify the being-for-itself of either the I or the Thou” (Simmel 1984, p. 155)

Simmel’s reflections on ‘universal philanthropy’ and Christian love help us understand love in its ‘ideal’, in the sense of abstract, dimension. They also trace the move from love directed to a person to love as a state of being of the subject. In the first instance, universal philanthropy is “concerned with the person as an abstraction” (Simmel 1984, p. 182). Universal philanthropy has the abstract character of eighteenth century universalism. It rests on “the elimination of the individual differences of its objects” to the extent of

becoming “unconditional” (Simmel 1984, p. 185). It is a general emotion based on shared humanity and, therefore, not one directed to anyone in particular. Simmel contrasts this with Christian love, which, for him, “embraces the *total* person” (Simmel 1984, p. 185, emphasis in the original).

“... Although the sinner is also an object of universal philanthropy, this is really *in spite of* the fact that he is a sinner, and only because ultimately, he is a human being as well. Christian love, on the other hand, embraces the sinner – and precisely as a sinner – if not with a greater love than is bestowed upon the normal person, then at least without that ‘in spite of’” (Simmel 1984, p. 185-186).

Simmel did not develop these reflections further¹⁷. However, Martin Buber and, later, Emmanuel Lévinas took Simmel’s ‘I and Thou’ in an explicitly ethical direction. The total embrace, to which Simmel refers when describing Christian love, is echoed in Lévinas’ moral conception of subjectivity, which rests on one’s responsibility for the other. Buber’s and Lévinas’ relational ethics is in contrast with the abstract principle of Kant’s categorical imperative. This tension has been played out in the debate between psychologists Lawrence Kohlberg (1973) and Carol Gilligan (1982). Kohlberg proposed six stages of moral development, where the highest stage identifies a conception of the good with universal justice. His theory has thus a strong affinity with the philosophy of Kant and Rawls, based on abstract principles, rights and duty.

¹⁷ Love is an incomplete collection of essays published posthumously.

Gilligan criticised Kohlberg's approach for adopting male experience and reasoning as universally normative (1982, p. 6). Women, she argued, see a moral dilemma as "a narrative of relationships that extends over time" (1982, p. 28), rather than a calculation that severs connections from relationships. Therefore, they would not score highly in Kohlberg's scale. In contrast with Kohlberg's 'ethic of justice', she proposed an 'ethic of care' to account for a worldview that privileges relationships. In support of Gilligan, Blum (1988) argued that the 'ethic of care' is just as universal as the 'ethic of justice'. More recently, the two ethics have been taken as complementary with Gilligan providing an expansion of Kohlberg's theory (Jorgensen 2006).

In sociology of religion, Wedam (1997), drawing on the Kohlberg-Gilligan debate, highlights how two religious groups used different ethics in discussing abortion. Both groups considered abortion immoral, yet one group applied an ethic of justice, implying "adjudication based on the principle of the right to life" (1997, p. 165); while the other group "applied an ethic of care in which the principle of nonviolence determined adjudication" (1997, p. 165). On a similar note, Edgell-Becker (1997), although not referring to Gilligan explicitly, draws the attention to the different "moral logics" present in congregational conflicts. She distinguishes between compassion and authority. Accordingly, "the logic of compassion or caring, a relational logic that keeps conflict, in most cases, from escalating into "winner takes all" contests. This logic emphasizes dialogue and compromise". In contrast, "the logic of religious authority, implementing the guidelines agreed upon in advance as originating from an authoritative text or person" (Edgell-Becker 1997, p. 140).

For Edgell, authorities justify choices on the basis of the authority of a text or person. However, this leaves out how individuals reinterpret the text (Bartokowski 1996) and how texts are used to justify practices, which may include those that have not been sanctioned by authorities or are in direct conflict with the will of authorities. Wedam suggests that different groups invoke different ethical principles, although it is not clear what makes one group choose one ethic over another. I construct the dichotomy ‘ethic of purity’ and ‘ethic of compassion’ on the basis of my empirical research without, however, endorsing the informants’ normative judgements or favouring one form of ethic over the other. It is not my intention to develop a theory of ethics, but to identify the connections between ethical norms and social dynamics of identity and community making. I begin by outlining the ethical norms of compassion as people-centred. This is in contrast with norm-oriented ethical norms of purity.

5. Compassion and Purity

The discourse and practices at Bethlehem church are dominated by a relational ethical approach, which privileges compassion over judgement. This is partly motivated by the negative experience research participants have had of church as judgemental. I, therefore, build on Simmel’s notion of “embracing of the *total* person” to construct a concept of compassion as the emotional participation in another’s suffering, but also the recognition of the other’s human dignity. Compassion is an encounter with another that enables the

actor to see the other as fully human. Thus, the other person is seen in her humanity rather than in the image we create through social categories, e.g. gay, woman, Asian, but also academic, parent, and pensioner. For instance, the religious actor, in encountering a homeless person, recognises the human dignity of the person, which lies beyond the social aspect of homelessness. Consequently, the homeless person is seen as ‘God’s child’, in the language of research participants. Yet, as one of my informants, Camden, shows in chapter ten, this seems to apply not only to those who suffer, but even to one’s spouse.

Compassion, therefore, gives rise to a state of mind of recognition of the divine in the human. There seems to be ‘intentionality’ to that state of mind. The actor wills the recognition of the other on the basis of the emotion of compassion. The aspect of intentionality highlights how compassion is a central value in the local culture that ought to be practised; rather than a feeling or a quality of specific persons. The ‘ethic of compassion’ underpins the actors’ self-understanding and their rationale for action (cf. chapter ten). Similarly, the ‘ethic of purity’ delineates the boundaries between right and wrong and is a rationale present in the ethical considerations of religious actors. The terms ‘compassion’ and ‘purity’ are employed to convey a more multidimensional meaning that goes beyond justice and relationality.

I conceive compassion and purity as rationales affecting boundary-making. Taking inspiration from Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (Douglas 1966/1989) and Simmel’s extremely brief considerations of honour, I construct purity as a norm-oriented ethics, which coalesces the group and guarantees order. Douglas saw in the laws of Leviticus the

structures of a society in the interplay between order and disorder. Accordingly, “pollution ideas” and “danger ideas” exert social pressure establishing rules of “good citizenship” (Douglas 1966/1989, p. 3). So purity delimits correct behaviour. Building on Simmel’s considerations regarding honour, the notion of purity can be expanded to stress much more the boundary-making of a community.

“... through the appeal to honor, society secures from its members the kind of conduct conducive to its own preservation, particularly within the spheres of conduct intermediate between the purview of the criminal code, on the one hand, and the field of purely personal morality, on the other” (Simmel 1898a, p. 680).

This is so because it regulates what is outside of the dominium of the law. “While civic law,” explains Simmel, “employs physical force as its sanction, while personal morality has no other recourse than the approval or disapproval of conscience, the laws of honor are guarded by penalties which have neither the pure externality of the former nor the pure subjectivity of the latter” (Simmel 1898a, p. 681). Honour, therefore, is actualised through the group’s condemnation and legitimisation setting the boundaries of behaviour and group identity. “By the demands upon its members contained in the group standard of honor the group preserves its unified character and its distinctness from the other groups within the same inclusive association” (Simmel 1898a, p. 681). Simmel does not conflate honour with universalistic ethics. On the contrary, it is a distinctive code. For instance, it is a matter of honour for the ascetic to let himself to be spit upon.

The 'ethic of purity' pertains to judgements over principles and actions, which are deemed ethical by the group and which are considered characteristic of the group. The 'ethic of compassion' is concerned with the acceptance of others, which makes boundaries more porous. Purity defines boundaries of 'right' belief and 'right' practice, while compassion privileges the experience of the person and is articulated through actions directed to specific people. I am not suggesting that one ethic is in any way superior to the other. Indeed, the two 'ethics' may be present at the same time. Therefore, there are two aspects to the two ethics: ethical norms and practices and boundary-making. With reference to aspect of ethical norms and practice, I illustrate the dynamics of the 'ethic of purity' and the 'ethic of compassion' in relation to an American video, which I accessed on a social medium website, regarding an anti-abortion campaign.

The interviewer approached anti-abortion campaigners who held signs showing – what they alleged to be – aborted fetuses. The campaigners sought to make abortion illegal in the United States. The interviewer asked them what they would like the penalty to be. The question was met with perplexity. The interviewer explained that an illegal action carries a penalty. Most of the interviewees were at a loss and did not want women, who underwent abortions, to be sentenced to prison. The intent of the video was to embarrass the campaigners. However, the most striking fact was the tension between the judgement over abortion ('ethic of purity') and the need for compassion ('ethic of compassion'), to which a couple of campaigners appealed explicitly. Thus, the distinction between 'ethic of purity' and 'ethic of compassion' helps seeing how actors translate into practice ethical norms.

I argued that purity is norm-oriented and concerns itself with 'right beliefs' and 'right action'. Being more detached from the concrete experience of the person, purity may be articulated more through strategic campaigning, which is what the anti-abortion campaigners were doing, than social action that has an immediate recipient. As I mentioned, the two ethics are present in the same group, so they are not mutually exclusive. The compassion approach of Bethlehem has led to a particular type of community and action that is people-oriented and service-oriented. Bethlehem does not engage in social justice campaigns locally or nationally; it privileges direct contact with people. The ethical discourse of the church plays a role, alongside the internal structures of leadership and membership of the church, in shaping the type of church community and the form action takes. Further research is needed to identify the rationale behind the choice of a type of social action over another.

With regards to the aspect of boundary-making, purity identifies the set rules of belief and behaviour that define the boundary of a group. For instance, belief in salvation of the soul through faith in Jesus excludes those who do not share that belief. In contrast, compassion stretches the boundaries of a group by seeking to accept the person regardless of the stage in their 'journey'. The practice of compassion may have an effect on rethinking boundary-making and the identity of the group (cf. chapter eight and ten). I thus construct the identity and community making of a group through the interplay of purity and compassion. It needs to be stressed that my interest in the formulation of the 'ethic of purity' and the 'ethic of compassion' does not lie in their normative potential, but in the possible sociological aspects of this distinction.

6. Conclusion

The chapter concerned itself with two main issues: the construction of the sacred and of the ethical rationale guiding ethical norms and practices and boundary-making. I have argued that individual religious actors contribute to the construction of the sacred by engaging with their tradition, which includes interpreting, innovating and subverting elements of tradition. Sacralisation, put forward in the first part of the chapter, is the process whereby individuals identify with their tradition, bestow value to its elements and legitimise them. Thus, the religious actor adopts religious tradition as an all-encompassing meaning system, but also contributes to shaping it by interpreting and legitimising it. Sacralisation is the basis for the construction of authenticity. What is sacralised, be it an idea, practice, object or place, identifies the boundaries of authenticity, which is inscribed within one's tradition. Being authentic is thus expressing one's religious sentiment through the sacralised narratives, ideas and practices of one's tradition. Religiosity, as the sensitivity to self-transcendence, is expressed within the particularism of the framework of tradition.

The latter part of the chapter responded directly to my empirical findings. The particular ethic, which is pre-eminent at Bethlehem, is one of compassion. The local narratives of my research participants construct compassion in contrast with judgement. Consequently, I posited a distinction between the 'ethic of purity' and the 'ethic of compassion' to stress the norm-oriented approach of the first and the people-oriented approach of the second. This

is not to be taken normatively. Neither ethic is superior to the other. The very broad terms 'purity' and 'compassion' were chosen to leave open the possibility of multiple meanings, rather than restrict the distinction to abstract normative categories. Accordingly, I suggested that both purity and compassion have an effect on the choice of specific practices, such as strategic campaigning versus providing a service to immediate recipients, and the dynamics of identity and boundary-making.

Chapter Eight

From Doctrine to Authenticity

1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the defining features of Bethlehem church: its origins, its founders, its narratives and practices. The local culture of Bethlehem is portrayed in the long account of section two, entitled 'Beginnings'. This is analysed in the subsequent sections. Following an explanation of the 'vision' of the church as 'modern, relevant and inclusive', the chapter reflects on the role of choice in being a Christian at Bethlehem and the construction of Christian authenticity, articulated as forming human relationships. Thus, it is argued that the narrative and practices of authenticity at Bethlehem point to a shift in emphasis from 'doctrine to authenticity', from propositional belief to conscious practice. Bethlehem sought to create a welcoming community where everybody would feel accepted. This results from the interpretation of 'following Jesus' as a call to form relationships in the church and in the local community. This chapter provides a broad view of the culture of Bethlehem and the local construction of authenticity. The reflection on doctrine and ethics reveals how the

‘ethic of compassion’ (explored further in chapter ten) relaxes the boundary-making of the church.

The narratives and practices of Bethlehem church show that the identification of authenticity with the practice of relationships has made doctrine, including the exclusive doctrine of salvation, secondary for many. This understanding of Christianity as a practice and the experience of relationships are discussed in sections five and six. Authenticity underpins the identity of Bethlehem church (cf. sections two and three) and is based on the conscious choice of believers, which engenders the commitment to be a Christian (cf. section four). The chapter begins with a glimpse of the local narratives around Christianity, as interpreted by my informants, and the role of the church in helping Christians practise authenticity. As explained in chapter three, the names and location have been anonymised by using the names of the characters in George Eliot’s novels, whilst Casaubon is a fictional character employed to make the narration smoother. The account is presented in a narrative style to ease the reader into the world of Bethlehem and of its members. The excerpts in quotations are taken from interviews, while the home group excerpts are based on field notes and therefore are not verbatim. Finally, the use of italics is to underline significant sentences.

Bethlehem, as mentioned in chapter three, was set up around 30 years ago in an area of rapid housing development that lacked a community “hub”, as Nicholas, one of the elders, explained. It is a “free church”, an independent evangelical church, of Baptist origin. In the beginning, the church consisted of an informal group meeting in different venues to

worship God. As the group grew and became more settled in the local area, they decided to buy land and build the church. The people who set up Bethlehem have often had an experience of church as judgmental, divisive, and old-fashioned. The “founding fathers” of Bethlehem, Nicholas, elder, and Felix, pastor, wanted to communicate Christianity to the “unchurched”, people who do not normally go to church, as told in the following section.

2. Beginnings

In the mid-1970s, Nicholas, a 15-year-old boy, found God. He told his family and they laughed and said ‘Don’t worry, it’ll pass’. It didn’t. Nicholas went on to found Bethlehem church. He wanted to communicate the truth he had discovered. So with his friend, Felix, he decided that it was time for something different, something that would not put people off, but would ring true. They were fed up with being preached hell, fire and brimstone and of singing unenthusiastically two-hundred year old hymns from dusty books on hard pews. They wanted to bring Christianity to the people. They began in the backroom of the Ship & Pilot, a pub just 300 yards from where the church now stands, on a small mound facing the sea.

The sixties had come and gone, but they had left a distinctive yearning for something authentic, something exciting, something true. The worship meetings moved from the pub to a school. The list of people willing to try something different and bored stiff of church

Sunday mornings grew steadily. It was time to build a home, a spiritual home, for the thirsty and the needy, for Christians searching for authentic Christianity and for the crowd outside seeking a soul in a world of strangers. Nicholas and Felix had a vision. They wanted a church that was not a club and a faith that was not just for the sake of believing. They wanted a place of comfort, where people could feel welcome. They wanted a building that would make that possible. It had to build bridges and include people. The building had to be open to the community to show a face of Christianity that didn't scare people off, that didn't judge or ask for money. But the 'founding fathers' also wanted something real that pierced through the hearts of people, that answered the big questions, the questions of pain and suffering, loneliness and emptiness. How do you do that? People don't want to go anywhere near a church. They think it's just self-righteous loonies looking down at you. They don't need salvation and they are quite happy with sin, thank you very much.

No use in talking about sin, sanctification and salvation if nobody understands what you mean. Nicholas looks towards the window and goes back a few decades, then says: "when we started to meet in homes, back in the eighties, that was just to meet together, study the bible together and pray together, in a small group. Bit by bit, we grew. There wasn't a strong focus on evangelism, on sharing faith other than in your personal life, until we had a public facility to hold meetings. ... As I was doing these things, we started to realise that we could invite people to these kind of events. I thought 'how are we gonna do this? How are we gonna present the information in a way that makes sense to people?' And it dawned on me 'why do we do church the way we do church?' ... So we started to look at that, we played with different types of styles. We did something called blue-prints for about a year or so,

once a month. We had a whole hour and half with videos, music, and a short message. ... The message was the same, but it was the way in which we were trying to communicate. Some non-Christians came along, I don't think anybody came to faith, ... but probably kept them on their journey, a little while... And that was in our mind when we opened this place and so we first started, probably the first 10 years or so, we said that our primary objective in running a church service on Sunday morning is for people who don't go to church". That was the vision: tell the story to those who don't know it.

Felix explains that the vision is for a modern church, where the services feel right, relevant to people's lives. "So they come along on Sundays, this isn't frightening; but the other thing is, is that it's serving society [...] a community that is committed to serve society and not be just a holy huddle inside a church building. [...] The word church has now become useless because we've ruined the word church, I mean it's a building now, it means stained glass, it's got an altar, funny talk there, that's not a church, the church is part of the Kingdom of God, it's people, it's relationships, it's a powerful spiritual thing, you know, but we threw that, so I use, the term kingdom ... helps break out of the word church, but community is a similar word to me, you know. Community is church in the community and moving out in the community ...".

Mr Casaubon didn't say a thing, he listened. He paid attention to every word, but wasn't sure he got the meaning of it. What had Jesus got to do with a café? It was a nice place, people were friendly and maybe God gave them a hand, but the whole thing about dying on a cross, salvation and sin didn't make much sense. He knew he liked the atmosphere. It was

an oasis of tranquillity and peace, only disrupted by the groups of people storming the place at regular intervals for classes of yoga, French and what have you. After Felix and Nicholas had left, Lucy noticed the puzzled look on Casaubon's face and said: "You see, the point is that ... those who started Bethlehem church came from all sorts of different church backgrounds wanting to strip all the stuff around church and get back to the real heart of their faith, which was trying to be more like Jesus". Casaubon nodded, but inside his head thoughts went round in circles and questions suddenly appeared from nowhere, questions he never pondered before, to do with God and religion. 'Wasn't Jesus meant to be God? How can you be like God? Isn't that heretical?' He finished his tea quickly before getting too entangled in theology. He left the café and looked back at the church. The night was falling and all you could see were the lights coming through the windows at the church centre.

As he lay on the sofa, Casaubon listened to Nicholas talking about the 'vision' for the church. "What is this vision thing?" asked Nicholas, "We need to be clear about this, about what we are about [...] I know people want to worship, there's nothing wrong with that, but small groups are perfect for worship. Let's face it, you actually can have too many prayer meetings, too many worship meetings, too many bible studies, because you become internally focussed and all you try to do is your thing in here, in your little holy huddle, whereas Christ never did that and I'm sure his church should never do that. [...] One thing that has become increasingly clear and challenging to me in this whole thing is this, if you're trying to boil down what Christianity is, you cannot do it simply [...] obviously there's too many things you boil it down to, what are they? [...] This one phrase keeps coming back to me, Jesus says "follow me". What does that mean? Where? How are you

gonna lead me? Where are we going together? And if you see how Jesus did his life, in the years of his public ministry, it wasn't just doing the way we do church. He didn't stand at the front of the synagogue and just preached. He did a bit of that as well, but that was probably minority at this time actually. But if we model Christianity in the way Jesus did his life, we wouldn't hold church services as often as we do. He was out there, in amongst these people's lives, sometimes he would speak spiritually to people, sometimes he wouldn't mention anything spiritual. Sometimes he healed people, sometimes he wouldn't, he would just speak spiritual things to them. So there's a whole spectrum of engagement with people, [...] like Willow Creek church in the States. I loved the way in which they understood the value of multimedia engagement with people. [...] We've run some comedy nights events, just to show it's not just about church and preaching Christianity. It's also about doing good and engaging and having fun actually. It's good to laugh."

'I'll drink to that' thought Casaubon who was now following the church meeting from a distance. It was meant to be an informal discussion on the vision, which was felt needed rekindling. There had been talk of expanding. It came to nothing though. Casaubon wasn't sure what happened. Some people wanted to work with the Council to provide services for the local community. They had to find money, a lot of money, and that didn't happen. It left a bitter taste in the mouth of Felix, who had tried so hard. If he could only have persuaded more people. They liked him a lot, but, you know people, they get tired of pursuing something so badly and, when it falls through, they just want to crawl back and lick their wounds. So they did and Felix left.

Casaubon wasn't clear about what happened. He knew that the proposal for the extension was put to the church and voted down. After Felix had gone, a new batch of elders was elected. They had enough to cut their teeth on with emerging competition to the café and nursery from a string of new shops nearby and an expanded school, the loss of the pastor and the stepping down of Nicholas, who were both the backbone of the church. Things started off fine. They hired Walter, as interim pastor, who had the same vision as Felix and Nicholas. He set out to learn about the local area. He wanted to gear the church to respond to the local needs and review Bethlehem's activities. Walter still lived in another town, further inland, and would travel nearly every day to Bethlehem to reorganise the church. He was clear that he would stay only for a couple of years or so and that the elders had to be in charge. Three years later, after a long soul-searching, Bethlehem found a new pastor.

3. Modern, Relevant, Inclusive

The picture that emerges, from the local understanding of religion and church-doing, paints a stark difference between the "traditional church" and Bethlehem church. The "traditional church" is a "holy huddle", as it is often described, an inward-looking club of like-minded people focussed on worship; an exclusive and unfriendly community, an old-fashioned institution where theological language dominates church services. In contrast, Nicholas and Felix, wanted to challenge the image of the church, as an ancient building resounding with traditional hymns played by an organ, and envisaged, in its stead, a church that was

“inclusive and welcoming”. They experimented with innovative forms of church-doing by having services with a contemporary feel, groups and activities that met local needs, and, above all, to create a welcoming community where everybody would feel accepted. Thus, the vision of Bethlehem is to communicate Christianity to all, especially to those who have an image of Christianity as outdated, exclusive and dogmatic.

In the previous section, Nicholas explained how they began to think of new ways of doing church and asked: “Why do we do church the way we do church?” He realised that the “primary objective in running a church service on Sunday morning is for people who don’t go to church”. That was the vision: “tell the story to those who don’t know it” (Nicholas, interview). In the words of Felix, the vision was for a church that was “modern”, and “relevant” to people’s lives. Thus, the dress is informal, the songs are contemporary, and the text of the passages read or of the hymns sung, during the service, is projected on a screen using power-point software. The sermons, mostly delivered by the elders and the pastor, are in everyday language and shun theological jargon. The idea behind it was for the church to function as a ‘social enterprise’ (Dinham 2011 and 2012), which required a different type of organisation, one with more flexible structures and supported by lay members.

Bethlehem is run by seven elders, a full time pastor and a group of trustees. Members are invited to provide feedback, ask questions and make suggestions at the fellowship meetings that are held two to three times a year. They are also encouraged to run activities and propose new ones. Members’ involvement is essential not only to ensure that there are

services and groups for the local community, but as a hallmark of participatory culture. This model of church-doing seeks to move away from – what is seen as – the hierarchical and institutional church to that of a church set up and run by its own members. More participatory structures respond to the changed social environment of contemporary Western societies that are far less hierarchical than in the past.

The picture of Bethlehem that emerges is one that is consistent with the innovation in church-doing described by Miller (1997), showing the cross-pollination between British and American evangelical traditions (Hatcher 2010). Bethlehem, above all, sought to be a physical and emotional place not only for church members, but also for the local community. Accordingly, the attempt at refashioning “church-doing” for contemporary times led the founders to carry the message of “modern, relevant, and inclusive” onto the building itself. Bethlehem does not “look like” a church: there are no Christian symbols, such as crosses or paintings. It was designed and built as a community centre, often mistaken for a non-religious community centre, and is generally called “the Centre” by the local community and church members. The design was an exercise in translating the “Christian message” into practice. The aim of the building was to build bridges and create a friendly home open to all, seven days a week.

“When we sat down and I walked into the main hall and went ‘are you sure this is a church, Winifred?’ There’s no priest, there’s no altar, there’s no gold or decoration, this just looks like a community hall and it was and it is and that’s the idea. It’s *reaching out to the community*” (Camden, interview).

Bethlehem also shares with 'new paradigm' churches, such as Saddleback Church, the same boundaries between a core group of committed members involved in 'ministries', and those who attend the church. Among the latter are those who attend religious services and those who just attend activities for the community, such as parent and toddler groups. A further distinction is between members, who have joined the church, and associates, who attend and participate but have not joined formally. At the time of writing, there are around 120 members and 80 associates. The act of joining the church requires accepting the 'statement of faith' (Appendix A), attending a short membership class, which explains the vision of Bethlehem and what is expected of members, and making a public statement during the Sunday service affirming one's willingness to join (Appendix C).

There are no set dues for joining the church, however, members are encouraged to give money and time to demonstrate 'stewardship', one's commitment to the church, but also ownership of it. Bethlehem, therefore, dedicates a Sunday service a year to stewardship, "where people are reminded to give themselves, their gifts, time and money", as Felix put it (Felix, interview). They are called to live out their Christianity in their personal and professional lives, but also as 'stewards' of the church. Individual believers have thus a stake in the church. These features reflect the central role of the individual in pursuing salvation and the tradition of Protestant voluntary society (Van Dyck 2007). The internal structures of Bethlehem also show the influence of the contemporary culture of participation. Thus, Bethlehem, in seeking to be "modern, relevant, and inclusive", has adopted the forms of contemporary organisations; however, to see its narratives and

practices as a form of 'branding' in today's consumer culture would miss their rationale and dismiss the importance of commitment, as explained below.

4. Choice and Commitment

The reflections in the section above stressed the role of participation as part of "relevant, modern and inclusive" church-doing. Miller (1997) argued that participation resulted from wider social processes of democratisation. It could be argued that churches are changing to attract and accommodate their audience. Indeed, many members of Bethlehem chose the church after having visited and attended others. Did they 'shop' for a church (Montemaggi 2013), as rational choice theorists would claim? Were they looking for a church that fitted with their views and lifestyle? Selina, who is a regular attendant of the 'women's prayer group', told me, during her interview, that she likes it because she feels free to share with other women what goes on in her life. Dorothea said that when her husband went to Bethlehem, he told her that he knew that they would "fit in this church" (interview). She added that she felt that it was "the right place" for her.

If we were to adopt a rational choice theory framework, it could be argued that they sought to 'maximise profit'. Accordingly, 'profit', in this case, is not pecuniary, but emotional. It could thus be argued that members of Bethlehem church are involved in the religious and social activities because they perceive that they will get something in 'return'. Thus, 'feeling

at home' and friendships are the 'goods' people gain by attending church. Dorothea, in her interview, contrasted Bethlehem church with other churches she had attended previously, and stated that she felt Bethlehem was the church for her, and that she felt accepted for who she was. This is in line with the emphasis on acceptance found in 'new paradigm' churches by Miller (1997, p. 21). Thus, Bethlehem, by being a 'spiritual home', as it is described by members, where everybody is welcome and where people care for one another, provides a comforting physical and emotional place.

Bethlehem 'fits'; it is 'the right place'; it 'meets people's needs'. It satisfies many of its members' needs by providing services, such as parent and toddler groups, and personal relationships. The guiding philosophy of the church is explicitly oriented towards meeting the physical and emotional needs of a person. Rational choice theorists might argue that Bethlehem members choose the church for its multiple benefits, including a caring community, friendships, and social groups. This understanding of choice, however, is an example of the failure of rational choice theory to comprehend the connection between choice and commitment. The following excerpts provide a glimpse of the reasons behind Celia's and Dorothea's choice of Bethlehem.

Celia and Arthur used to go to another church, but they had small children and wanted somewhere that had young families. Some friends recommended Bethlehem and so they gave it a try. It was "a breath of fresh air", reminisces Celia, "We were really, we were immediately embraced and welcomed [...] it did very soon feel like the right place for us to be." It was a big decision to move

house and change school for the children, but Bethlehem felt like home. They liked the place and the vision of *“being Christ [...] to be like Jesus, become more like Jesus in the community, the idea of really serving and having opportunities to serve.”* Just seeing how everybody was involved in things made the place attractive. There was real commitment from the people of the church to serve the community. She was pretty clear that a church is more than a Sunday service. *“It is no good to just come along and sit there on a chair [...] and then go home. That’s not, that’s not really what is all about [...] God has something for everybody to do, whatever that is, it might be to be at the front, it might be stacking the chairs. Everybody has a part to play”* (Celia, interview).

“It’s that sense of community, of home”, says Dorothea. Dorothea and Will moved to the area a couple of years ago. They were welcomed from the time they got there and it was now their “spiritual home”. Dorothea compares her experience of other churches. It’s not that they were bad Christians, but there is a difference. *“When I came to Bethlehem, I was accepted for exactly who I am.”* She doesn’t like the “kind of religion [...] you go to church on a Sunday and the rest of the week it goes out of your head and it can be easy to fall into that trap and I didn’t, I never wanted to fall into that trap”. There’s no point in hiding in Bible study meetings if you don’t “live your faith in the community”. In a previous church, she was once asked whether she would go to the bible study, she replied that she was going out on a pub crawl. She horrified her listeners, but that night she gave ‘her testimony’ twice, telling people why she had become

a Christian. “It was more useful than if I had been in the bible study.” So she liked Bethlehem, she didn’t have to pretend and behave. She didn’t have to keep away from non-Christians. *“At Bethlehem, they realised that a church can’t run on an evangelist on his own, it’s not all about one person, everyone should take a role and no one should be taking a back seat. It’s not the minister that is the church, it’s the people who comprise it”* (Dorothea, interview).

The “spiritual home” is not merely a place of emotional and physical comfort, but a place of growth in one’s relationship with God. The believer chooses God, yet this choice engenders commitment. By choosing God, the believer establishes a ‘personal relationship’ with God, which, in turn, calls on the believer to ‘answer’. The initial choice thus becomes a commitment to ‘live differently’ and be in accordance with ‘God’s will’ by following – what is often described by informants as – the “topsy-turvy” logic of faith. Thus, whilst commitment might have originated in an autonomous choice, the ‘personal relationship with God’ transforms that choice into dependence on God. In other words, believers choose to commit, but in doing so, they create a bond with the overarching authority of God. Prayer is asking God to manifest God’s will. This requires trust in God and, therefore, acceptance of God’s will, even when it seems to be against one’s own perceived interests or what is considered ‘rational’ in the general culture one inhabits.

“When we ask for revelation from God, we need to be prepared to deal with what comes from it” (Selina, women’s prayer group, 3rd July 2009).

“... make yourself open to the answer you don’t want” (Will, home group evening, 25th November 2009).

We begin to see how religion reflects Simmel’s understanding of religiosity as a mode of consciousness, where belief is intended as *belief in*, or trust. Believers have often remarked how difficult it is to understand what God ‘says’ and that they ‘get it wrong’. The religious frame of mind calls on the person to maintain the ‘awareness’ of God in seeking to understand the will of God. Religious life is the fruit of a personal relationship with God, which requires a deep commitment and a distinctive way of living. Such a way of living is seen as ‘countercultural’ for it is centred on God and God’s will, rather than society’s ways. This includes being in opposition to the ‘traditional church’, seen as irrelevant to people’s lives, and of the ‘world-friendly church’, which fails to challenge the cultural norms outside its doors.

Celia and Arthur, Dorothea and Will chose Bethlehem because of the church’s inclusivity. They did not choose a church that ‘fitted’ them, but one that was open to all and encouraged them to be open to all. They felt the church was relevant to people’s lives by being inclusive and having a positive impact on the local community. Informants identify strongly with the ‘vision’ of Bethlehem as a ‘community-focussed’ church seeking to meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of people locally. This vision is embodied in their ministries, where members form relationships with people in the local community. However, Bethlehem church is not merely an exercise in ‘church-doing’, in organising and

running a church to attract the unchurched, and provide services to the community; rather members at Bethlehem seek to “follow Jesus” by building relationships in the community.

The rejection of institutional religion is accompanied by an emphasis on authenticity: being true to the example of Jesus, which calls for a continuous effort to live up to that ideal through the practice of relationships. The notion of authenticity provides a distinctive identity and grounding in – what is deemed to be – the essence of Christianity. Yet, Christianity, as a practice of relationships, erodes the primacy of traditional doctrinal beliefs, such as the exclusive doctrine of salvation, and the strictness of specific ethical stances, such as regarding homosexuality. This understanding of authenticity and the ensuing practice of relationships trump the adherence to doctrinal statements.

5. From Doctrine to Authenticity

Godwin, manager of the centre, states in his introduction to the Alpha course: “We don’t do religion, religion causes problems. We are about relationships”. At Bethlehem, Christianity is understood as relationships and, hence, as concrete experience of God through others. It is not focussed on the experience of the otherworldly numinous; rather Christianity is seen primarily as divine love lived through human relationships, in the “here and now”. The Christian faith is contrasted with “religion” that is made up of theology, the “heavy stuff”, as a member described it.

“...the starting point is ‘God is good’. If you start from a, like most people who don’t know God and don’t know faith, that God is either a God with a big stick or he’s this tyrant in the old testament or he is not here, he is an absentee landlord, that kind of approach, then I think you are missing out on religion. If I call that, I don’t like the concept of religion. I don’t think religion is good [...] religion is adhering to a bunch of principles and a way of living what you think it will make you good with God, whereas faith, Christian faith and the Christian experience of life, is about not you, but about Jesus, about God coming down in the form of man and meeting you rather than you having to do something to attain to his standards” (Camden, interview).

In this dialectical opposition between the “real church” of Bethlehem and the “traditional church”, between religion and faith, or the Christian life, we begin to glimpse how Christianity is being interpreted and articulated, and why doctrine becomes secondary. The distinction made by my informants between “religion” and “faith”, or “being a Christian” testifies to a discomfort and, often, rejection of Christianity understood as adherence to doctrine. Authenticity, here, is formulated as a ‘doing’, a process, in which religious actors engage to live their faith. It is the continuous attempt at being true to what is understood to be “the truth of Christianity”. The search for authenticity is the search for a Christian life that goes beyond institutionalised religion. It is a constant and never-ending quest for truth. This is primarily articulated in the conception of Christianity as relationships, which is deemed “countercultural”. By the term “countercultural”, informants identify the

commitment to a lifestyle that counters the materialism and self-interest of contemporary society. Thus, authenticity is a dialectical process of discarding the “falsity” of social life as much as the institutional aspects of Christianity.

Home group evening, 7th October 2009

Arthur: “We tend to think that we own what we have ... the culture around us tells us so. Materialism is a fundamental part of our society, we are part of society so it affects us ... The challenge of the bible is how we deal with our possessions and money”.

Accordingly, being a Christian means challenging the dominant culture. Bethlehem seeks to be the refuge that goes against selfish and empty consumerism; a place of relationships in an individualistic competitive, and lonely world. The interpretation of Christianity as “relationships” signals dissatisfaction with contemporary society, seen as dominated by individual autonomy, to which Christians counter a conception of human beings as “interdependent”. Thus, the possibility of forming relationships with people in the local community resonates with the idea of church that many members hold. When Celia, now an active member of Bethlehem, was looking for a new church with young families, she liked the vision of “being Christ [...] to be like Jesus, become more like Jesus in the community, the idea of really serving and having opportunities to serve” (Celia, interview). It is in community, in relationships, that Christians can be authentic and follow Jesus.

Home group evening, 22nd June 2011

Arthur: “instead of staying on your own, you should be forming relationships with neighbours, rather than crashing out on the sofa and eating crisps. Be out there engaging with someone. It’s important to have community interaction”.

Nicholas: “when we did a survey in the local community, 20 years ago, one of the biggest issue was loneliness. One of the reasons why people come into the centre is that they want to feel part of something”.

The identity of Bethlehem church is based on the idea of a church “in community”. As Felix explained: “The church itself is a community, but also it is ‘in’ community, in the society in which it lives and serving that community, blessing that community”. This identity is underpinned by a theology centred on human relationships, which mirrors the relationship between the believer and Jesus. Christianity is thus not something to be believed, but something to be experienced and, above all, to be lived out. Christians are “followers”, not “believers”. The relationship with the divine is translated into human relationships. Relationships are understood as the realisation of “following Jesus”: loving others by welcoming and accepting them for who they are. These are not exclusive relationships among church members, but open to the wider community.

Thus, being “relevant, modern, and inclusive” needs to be understood within the framework of authenticity. It is not an end in itself; rather it is a way to form and live relationships with others. Bethlehem is “relevant” because it is “real”; it speaks to people

without the mediation and artificiality of hymns and pews. The aspect of “relevance” is also part of the construction of authenticity. Bethlehem, therefore, is not simply adapting to culture in the pursuit of “relevance”; rather, by being “countercultural”, it maintains the tension with culture. This notion of authenticity rests on Christianity transcending culture, which includes institutional Christianity, and thus being “true” for the whole of humanity and for all times. Thus, being a Christian is “being like Jesus”: incarnating a timeless truth that often runs counter to today’s customs, but also to “religion”. The “countercultural” stance has the potential for undermining doctrine at its very core, as shown in the next section.

5.1 The Practice of Relationships and Salvation

The vision of acceptance and inclusivity is translated in allowing non-members to participate in the activities of the church. The relatively high number of associates in proportion to members means that there are associates who participate actively in the life of the church. This includes a woman from a non-Christian background volunteering in one of the groups. The significance of this openness should not be underestimated. Christian evangelicals generally subscribe to the doctrine of *sola fide*, according to which salvation comes only from belief in Jesus and not “good works”. Therefore, a “good” person is not saved unless they believe in Jesus. At Bethlehem, this doctrine is secondary to the message and practice of relationships. Some of my informants struggle to reconcile a loving God with an exclusive doctrine of salvation, while others reject the doctrine outright and are

quite certain that salvation is not exclusive to Christian believers. At my direct questions over salvation, many informants felt that they could not “make that call”.

Nevertheless, there are members who believe that people from other religions are not saved, although they have access to the truth of God. At a Bible study group, Caleb, the group leader, talked of “false teaching”. Among the false teachers were American televangelists who advertise healing and ask for money. Caleb affirmed that “the claim of Jesus (of being the way to God) is sacrosanct”, however this did not seem to be exclusive. He explained that: “The truth is like a circle and if we represent different religions through symbols, such as the star of David, the Crescent, they cover part of it but not all. Only Jesus Christ covers it all. However, most Christians’ understanding of that truth is also partial so there’s a need to be humble and learn from others, including those from different faiths”. (Field notes, 4th July 2009). Thus, non-Christians can know God and have a relationship with God, although it is not clear whether this is sufficient for the salvation of the soul.

Talking to Felix (informal conversation, 28th June 2012), the former pastor, enquiring whether non-Christians could enter heaven, he replied “It depends on what you mean by heaven”. He did not believe that non-Christians were damned, but that there was a difference, although he did not elaborate on it. He said: “I believe in Jesus’ ‘I am the way, nobody comes to the Father (God as the father), except through me’”. Nevertheless, he sees religion as people’s “attempt to get hold of God, Christianity is part of it, but there’s also revelation”. The real difference, for Felix, is that “(Christian) faith is ‘sanctification’, it needs to transform, renewing your mind and make you think the way God thinks”. Thus, faith is

having a relationship with God, evidenced by self-transformation, expressed in love for others. Again, Felix seemed to suggest that non-Christian souls were saved, although they did not enjoy the same relationship with God and the transformative aspect of sanctification. During a home group evening (24th June 2009), Camden, faced with the question of salvation, said: “there must be something else”. In his interview, he said the following:

“I see God at work in Christians and non-Christians alike and one of my great friends in my work at the moment, who isn’t a Christian. [...] He says a lot of things which I regard as true and someone who doesn’t accept that he is religious in any way or Christian in any way saying things that have a truth means that in this world there is truth and we are all part of that truth. God will work in individuals to teach you truth and to show you more truth, but it’s not something which is just for Christians cos it’s not meant to. [...] So it’s always the process of God working in us. The more you hang on to him, the more you trust him, the more you spend time with him, the more he’s gonna change you, hopefully the better. That’s the road we are all on and that’s the road we should be on and even people who at heart are unconcerned, are not Christian, haven’t dedicated their life to Christ are still on that path, they just don’t know it yet”.

A possible reading of the text above is Camden’s acceptance of a pluralistic notion of truth. Camden seems to suggest that truth is shared human values, albeit originating in God, and feeling compassion taps into that truth. However, I would like to suggest a more subtle

appreciation of truth. Camden, whilst recognising truth outside of Christianity, affirms Christianity's privileged, but not exclusive, way to the truth. This reading is supported by a subsequent conversation with Camden. Camden and Felix point to Christianity being the way to be authentic as human beings and as Christians, which is expressed in having a relationship with God and with others. This shows a shift in narrative from eternal salvation to authenticity in a church that is a relatively mainstream evangelical church. Authenticity means being a Christian is a practice sustained by belief in Jesus.

Thus, Christianity is "following", rather than (doctrinal) "believing"; "being in relationships", rather than "being judgmental," and "serving God", rather than staying in the "holy huddle". Belief in Jesus does not necessarily entail belief in the doctrine of exclusive salvation. Belief in Jesus is a call to being like Jesus in relationship with others. The narrative of Christianity, as something to be experienced and lived in relationships and carrying a "countercultural" message, constructs how authentic religion, or Christian life, is understood and practised at Bethlehem. Authenticity is the practice of being true to the example of Jesus, who is seen as the embodiment of compassion. The practice of relationships is thus underpinned by compassion and, in turn, relationships reinforce the primacy of compassion over doctrine, as in the case of salvation, and over judgment, as in the case of homosexuality.

5.2 The Practice of Relationships and Homosexuality

During the three years of fieldwork at Bethlehem, I noticed a conspicuous absence of judgment of homosexuals. I have never come across homosexuality being mentioned in derogatory tones. The first encounter with the subject of homosexuality came at a study group (24th June 2009) led by Caleb, an elderly member of the church, who referred to a legal case where a Christian registrar had been fired for not wanting to perform civil partnership ceremonies. The reference underlined the sense of imposition of external values on Christians. However, there was clear and unequivocal condemnation of criminalisation or persecution of homosexuals. It took nearly a year for the matter of homosexuality to resurface in the form of homoerotic light-hearted innuendos among participants, during a social evening. Camden offered Humphrey a lift and joked about his wife being out of town. All the people present laughed and kept the joke going. I was surprised at the ease of the conversation.

Indeed, talking informally to Camden and Winifred, they were clear that they had no objections to homosexuals being allowed to get married. This, of course, is not to be taken as representative of the views of the majority at Bethlehem. Yet, the most illuminating example of the overarching value of compassion over judgment came from Walter. Walter was the interim pastor at Bethlehem after the founding pastor, Felix, left the church four years ago. After a few years, he was involved in the recruitment process for the permanent post of pastor. Walter participated in the final interview, which involved one candidate. He told me that he asked the candidate how he would deal with homosexuals, single people,

and people going through divorce. He told me he liked the answer as it was pretty much how he would have answered so I asked how he would have answered.

“We need to embrace people as fellow human beings regardless of the circumstances. In many churches, they reject the person, which means not receiving one another, not even within the church. You can’t reject the person because of the circumstances they are in. That’s what happens very often in faith communities. I have lovely times with people, who sometimes would come and cry on my shoulder. It’s being a human being, for goodness’ sake, you know? And showing myself vulnerable as well. I think that our evangelism is to get to the core of people, I have no right to tell you what to do, no right at all, but if I care about you, you might trust me enough to ask my opinion on things or to ask me how could this work for me? That’s where I feel the church must be. Traditionally, the dogma of churches gets in the way ‘I believe this so you must be wrong’. As a result, they can’t see the person of another faith as a person. We are made in the image of God, this means we are equal. We need to identify with one another’s humanity. This is core to Jewish tradition: how do you deal with the stranger?” (Walter, interview)

6. Discussion

The narratives and practices of committed members of Bethlehem, recounted above, show a long-standing search for a church that is “real”. Disenchanted with institutionalised

religion, but, above all, with the exclusivity and judgemental culture of the “traditional church”, this group of evangelicals sought to create a community that responded to people’s spiritual and social needs in today’s world. From this search emerges the notion of authenticity, as a ‘doing’, a process of discovery of how to be a Christian. Authenticity is articulated through the dialectical opposition between “religion” and “faith”, “believing” and “following”, “traditional church” and “real church”, but also between “culture” and “counterculture”.

Authenticity is lived in the practice of relationships, underpinned by the value of compassion. Human relationships thus mirror the relationship (authentic) Christians have with Jesus and are the concrete expression of that relationship. Through human relationships, Christians gain knowledge and experience of Jesus and become like him. Thus, being true to Christianity is not exhausted by belief or experience of the divine, but it is primarily about practice. Religious life is not about experiencing the numinous, but being like Jesus in one’s daily encounters. Therefore, the attempt at being “relevant, modern, and inclusive”, as a church, is not a form of refashioning, or of modernisation, of “church-doing”, but a way to practise authentic Christianity.

In a pluralistic society, the practice of relationships and the value of compassion undermine traditional doctrines and ethics, such as the exclusivity of salvation and the condemnation of homosexuality. Although my informants, including Camden, are not necessarily doing away with exclusive salvation, they are relaxing those boundaries and rethinking what Christian “truth” is. The recognition and “embrace”, to use Walter’s words, of humanity

gives primacy to the “truth” of human relationships over doctrinal “truths”. As mentioned in chapter two, this shift to authenticity and critical rethinking and refashioning of Christian identity is already present in the ‘emerging movement’, which is often conversant with ‘hermeneutic deconstruction’. Bethlehem is not an ‘emerging church’ as such and, indeed, began as a Baptist church. I posit that the emphasis on practice and authenticity rather than the salvation of the soul and doctrine is gaining a wider appeal. This includes divergence from – what used to be – official doctrine. Research, in the United States (Putnam et al. 2010) and in the ‘bible belt’ of Norway (Repstad 2003, 2008 and 2009), shows that Christian evangelicals are also shifting in their understanding of doctrinal beliefs.

Putnam and his colleagues found that “83% of evangelical Protestant say that those not of their faith could go to heaven” (Putnam et al. 2010, p. 535). When asked whether this included non-Christians the figure went down to 54% (Putnam et al. 2010, p. 536), which is still a significant proportion. Evangelicals also recognised “basic truths in other religions” with just over 20% stating that only one religion is the true one (Putnam et al. 2010, p. 546). Putnam’s reason for the high levels of tolerance in American society, including among religious people, is due to the high level of diversity and fluidity of religiosity. For instance, Putnam reports that about a third of all Americans “choose their religion rather than simply inheriting it” and that about half of married Americans have spouses from a different religious tradition (Putnam et al. 2010, p. 148).

In Europe, Repstad also documented a shift away from a more sectarian outlook and towards an understanding of Christianity, which stresses experience and community (Repstad 2009, p. 127). According to Repstad, “[D]ifferences are still expressed, but less dramatically than before. There is more talk now about practicing Christians and active Christians, less about saved people, not to mention about non-saved” (Repstad 2009, p. 128). Indeed, the subject of hell has become “an unpleasant dogmatic issue in conservative circles” (Repstad 2008, p. 22). Repstad also supports the connection between the change towards a more ‘liberal’ Christianity and the encounter of other worldviews: “Christian leaders ... when asked to reflect, they often say that changes in their views are caused by challenging encounters with people” (Repstad 2008, p. 20). This lends credence to the broader cultural accommodation of evangelicals (Hunter 1985 and 1987; McConkey 2001; Shibley 1996).

The main reasons, I advance, for the stress on authenticity rather than the exclusive notion of salvation are three: pluralism, contemporary economic and social life, and individualism. Thus, in the first instance, the encounter with others has made many question their doctrine of salvation and judgment of homosexuality. Pluralism is, here, not the presence of different religious and non-religious traditions, but the normative framework in which such diversity is seen as “a positive value” (Beckford 2003, p. 81). This leads to an articulation of Christianity as a distinctive identity, a part of multicultural Britain, but also to the acceptance of others on an equal footing, which may clash with doctrinal beliefs. This is compounded by the lesser influence of religious authorities in post-1960s Western culture (Brown 2001 and 2010; McLeod 2007).

The 1960s cultural and societal shifts have led to the legitimisation of individual autonomy thus opening the door for a wider reinterpretation of doctrine in the light of individual experience. This does not necessarily mean that individual autonomy dominates over external authority; rather that we witness a rise of multiple centres of authority (Wood 2007). Wood interpreted the shift as “the relativization of multiple authorities, such that no single authority (or range of authorities) exerts a formative influence within the life of a group or individual, and that participation in them comes overwhelmingly from a certain class fraction” (2007, p. 71). The increased cultural diversity of Western societies has allowed religious actors to be in contact with a variety of traditions and interpretations, and to rely for information on a wide range of sources. In post-1960s Western societies, the coexistence of multiple, often overlapping, identities has given rise to a pluralistic framework where diversity is not only accepted, but valued. Thus, pluralism, understood here as the acceptance and value of diversity (Beckford 2003, p. 81), provides a paradigmatic shift in cultural framework for the re-definition of Christianity.

In the second instance, I argue that the change in material circumstances of the West. As mentioned in chapter one, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries oversaw remarkable economic growth and improved life with the most recent and spectacular phase taking place in the 1960s. This has had an impact on the focus of religion. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, the West saw a massive change in living standards, industrial output, and technological development. Although “the Golden Age was a worldwide phenomenon” (Hobsbawm 1994, p. 259), it was the West that experienced the most radical changes. In the 1960s, west European unemployment averaged at 1.5% (Hobsbawm 1994,

p. 259). “World output of manufacturers quadrupled between the early 1950s and the early 1970s and ... world trade in manufactured products grew tenfold” (Hobsbawm 1994, p. 261). “In the 1930s, even in the rich USA about a third of household expenditure still went on food, but by the early 1980s only 13 per cent” (Hobsbawm 1994, p. 269).

The economic boom of the sixties had a profound cultural and social impact. The ‘counterculture’ together with the nascent consumer society emphasised individual distinctiveness and self-expression transforming all aspects of society deeply. I argue that these monumental changes have allowed a perspective focussed more on the “here and now” and less on the “thereafter”. Salvation was about eternity, but eternity has become less of a concern. The authenticity of my informants seeks to give meaning to life today, not only in prospect of eternal judgment. Consequently, truth is not exclusive to Christianity; rather the distinctiveness of Christianity rests on the process of authenticity, which is expressed in (compassionate) relationships.

In the third instance, the traditional individualistic perspective of Protestant Christianity is, here, translated in the search for authenticity. Salvation is based on the faith of the individual and is evidenced by individual transformation. Against a pluralistic cultural context, which calls for distinctive identities in the sea of diversity, Protestant emphasis on inner search and personal faith is translated in the search for authenticity. Thus, evangelicals are seeking “authenticity”, to be true to the example of Jesus that goes beyond the historical forms and teachings of the church. Yet, it is precisely this search that forces

constant change to go beyond the social constraints of a specific time. In seeking to transcend themselves, evangelicals reinvent evangelicalism.

7. Conclusions

The original vision of Bethlehem church was to provide a sense of community and to articulate Christianity in a way that could be meaningful to people's lives and sense of self today. Bethlehem fashioned its identity in opposition to the "traditional church" to embody a vision of Christianity that seeks to be more accessible to all, but also truer to the message of Jesus. The vision of Bethlehem, to be a welcoming and inclusive church for all, is grounded on relationships. It is a vision of authenticity for the person developed through human relationships, which reflect the relationship between the believer and God. Thus, Bethlehem does not simply strive to be "modern" and "relevant" to adapt to the times; it does not simply provide comfort to church and community members; rather it aspires to be the place where people can seek to be authentic, as human beings and Christians, by forming human relationships.

The chapter has shown how the narrative and practice of relationships is having an effect on the interpretation of doctrine. The encounter with others is eroding sectarian interpretations of doctrine. The study does not seek to provide a representative sample of Christian evangelicals in the UK; rather it highlights how many active and committed

evangelicals struggle with the doctrine of salvation and, often, reject it, on the basis of an overarching ethics of compassion (cf. chapter ten). Christianity is thus deemed by informants not a “religion”, but “a life”, a practice that requires commitment and involvement. It is “countercultural”, in opposition to mainstream culture, seen as individualistic and materialistic, and in opposition to the inward perspective of the “traditional church”. Bethlehem’s culture is grounded on a conception of Christianity as “relationships”.

The practice of relationships is centred on compassion for others, which reflects how Jesus is seen at Bethlehem. This results in a shift in emphasis from doctrine-based religion, as adherence to a set of theological convictions, to authenticity. This is not to suggest a complete foregoing of doctrine, but an important change in how Christianity is understood and practised in everyday life. The search for authenticity is the fruit of macro-level social and cultural changes, but also of the day to day practice of relationships in a pluralistic society. Thus, the shift in emphasis from doctrine to authenticity is part of a wider trend of refashioning religious and spiritual expressions in diverse and liberal Western societies. This has enormous implications not only for the innovations in church-doing and theology, but also for the engagement of evangelicals with the public sphere.

Chapter Nine

The Authenticity of Being a Christian

1. Introduction

The previous chapter showed the 'move' from doctrine to authenticity. Bethlehem, like 'new paradigm' churches, rejects – what is felt as – the institutionalisation of religion, its formality, hierarchies and intellectualism, and locates religiosity in a personal encounter with God, which is lived out in human relationships. Being a Christian, however, is not just an experience of the divine, but a commitment to practise a way of life. Informants oppose the view of Christianity as holding a set of beliefs or belonging to a church, and argue that being a Christian is about being true to the example of Jesus. Christianity is understood as a continuous effort to be true to the values embodied by the figure of Jesus. It is an attitude expressed in being compassionate towards others. In a pluralistic society, which recognises the value of different worldviews and traditions, religious identity is more than belief

and/or belonging (Davie 1994, 2002, and 2007; Day 2011), but a mode of consciousness, which calls for commitment to practise.

This is best understood through the framework of authenticity, outlined in chapter six. Authenticity is grounded on a relational and processual understanding of the individual in three dimensions: a 'social I', an 'individual I', and a self-transcendent I'. Authenticity is thus a process of constructing one's identity in relation to one's social context and relationships, to one's personal individuality, and to one's understanding of truth. Specifically, authenticity rests on the actors' awareness of truth, inscribed in their tradition's religious narratives, and their commitment to practise through the interpretation of their tradition. As mentioned previously, I identify religious tradition with the religious symbols, rituals, norms, customs, beliefs and narratives associated with a religion regardless of their 'official' status. Legitimacy derives from what is felt to be authentic by the group and by individual religious actors (cf. chapter seven).

Mirroring the multidimensionality of the self ('I and Thou'), as outlined in chapter six, authenticity is articulated as grasping the truth, which has a social, and individual, and a self-transcendent dimension. Accordingly, the search for authenticity, at the 'social' level, involves acquiring a Christian perspective by interpreting Christian tradition and committing to follow Jesus in one's daily life. This often requires rejecting mainstream cultural values that clash with it, such as consumerism. Being a Christian is thus a practice, rather than a belief system. Christians seeking authenticity are engaged in the process of interpreting and constructing religious tradition. Authenticity is social because one's

interpretation of tradition is informed by one's social and cultural context, including one's socio-economic status, education, and demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, and place of residence. The social dimension also refers to the religious group of the religious actor, in this case the home group and the wider church community.

Authenticity is 'individual' because it needs to strike a chord with the individual. The individual dimension indicates that truth needs to 'make sense' to the person individually, affecting them emotionally and intellectually and is always in reference to one's tradition. The person thus constructs her identity as a Christian by inserting herself within the framework of her understanding of Christianity. Self-transcendent authenticity refers to the attempt to tap into universal truth, understood through one's tradition. Building on Simmel's concept of self-transcendence, one's realisation that the world is but "one side", allows one to transcend it by virtue of this very recognition. The transcending is momentary; however the sensation of the other side, so to speak, of awe, of truth, sets forth a continuous process of self-transcendence, which is expressed through practice.

Authenticity is thus not an essence, but a process of constructing one's identity at the level of one's consciousness and one's behaviour. It rests on identifying what informants feel is true Christianity, which is often in contrast with wider society's values, thus marking the distinctiveness of Christianity. Authenticity is articulated through one's commitment to practising Christianity intentionally: with consciousness that one's practices are in service to God. It is not just a search for replicating what is seen as the model of early Christianity, nor is it an attempt to modernise tradition; rather, the search for authenticity constructs

one's identity in relation to one's tradition and one's sense of truth, which may be understood as universalistic, but is articulated through the particularity of one's tradition (cf. chapters five and six).

The process requires personal participation and interpretation on the part of individual actors. Accordingly, the interpretation of the figure of Jesus and of early Christianity is not a historically or philologically accurate exegesis, but an ideal that guides the practice of being a Christian. The image of Jesus is translated into narrative and practices for living life today. Christian tradition is subject to active reflection to make sense of one's everyday life. Thus, being an authentic Christian is, first and foremost, a practice.

2. The 'Social' Dimension

The analysis of Bethlehem's discourse and practices, in the previous chapter, points to the key aspects of how authenticity is viewed in the local culture. Being "relevant" and "countercultural" and, above all, forming relationships are important *emic* categories of authenticity. In this section, I explore further the construction of Christianity within the group. The first extract is from a home group discussion during the week dedicated to 'stewardship', in which members' commitment in terms of money and participation was discussed. The second extract refers to a discussion based on questions in a DVD series aiding the study of the bible.

Home Group discussion, 7th October 2009

Arthur: "We are stewards; we are not owners of anything. The culture we live in is one that says to us 'that is mine'."

Nicholas: "It's countercultural"

Arthur: "The Bible says that God gives it all. I want you to manage your money wisely to serve others and for kingdom's purposes. God says 'I'm keeping tabs, I'm watching what you do'. The effect of culture on us is huge. How we guard money is a reflection of the way we are. God is looking to challenge our perspective."

Nicholas: "God wants to lead us, learn the right way."

Arthur: "how much of God's money am I keeping for myself? It's upside down. [...] We are either countercultural or not at all. You're either in it or you're out of it. If we do things begrudgingly [...] it's not the attitude God wants. It challenges to our core."

Home Group discussion, 24th November 2010

Selina: "why is an attitude of obedience crucial to fulfil this role (of leader)? [...] he's asking us to be different."

Arthur: "if we choose to be obedient is like walking in the right direction if we choose not to be obedient, we fall a little bit and go backward."

Selina: “people have this expectation of you (as Christians). People, family, they say to you ‘you’re a Christian, you can’t say that ...’. It’s constantly thrown at you. [...] I’m a work in progress!”

The first extract highlights the sense of not owning what one has in life. It is an attitude of humility based on the belief that one’s possessions, abilities and fortune are granted by God and, therefore, need to be used to serve God. This is contrasted with outside culture, where people feel what they have is fruit of their labour, that they own it and have control over it. Thus, Christians are “countercultural” for they recognise God’s sovereignty over and above everything else. Consequently, one needs to follow “the right way”, as put by Nicholas, and make use of what one is granted in this life according to the ethical ideals of the Kingdom of God, rather than what is valued by culture. There was mention of the need for finding a balance between keeping the necessary for everyday life and “giving back to God”, although the discussion tended to be abstract, with few concrete examples.

Most of the discussion reiterated the notion of viewing everything one has as coming from God. Thus the focus was on one’s “attitude”, rather than the specific use of one’s resources for ethical ends. Being a Christian requires a distinctive perspective. It is a mode of consciousness, from which action follows. This is evident in the second extract. Selina asks a question from the booklet used to guide the study of the bible, which refers to chapter 19 of the book of Exodus. She adds her interpretation by highlighting obedience as the aspect that distinguishes Christians from mainstream culture. Obedience requires being “different”, recognising God’s sovereignty, in

contrast with Western society where self-authority is celebrated. As mentioned, choosing to be a Christian engenders commitment.

Obedience is understood by Arthur as the way to stay on the right path. By walking in the right direction, he means living an ethical life, which is corroborated by Selina who points out the expectations other people have of moral behaviour on the part of those who define themselves as Christians. She exclaims that she is “a work in progress”, which is more than a joking justification for human weaknesses; it points to Christian life as a continuous effort. Thus, being a Christian is a distinctive way of perceiving the world and practising life, according to Christian values, as understood by participants, but also according to the group’s construction of Christian identity as “countercultural”.

3. The ‘Individual’ Dimension

Individual consciousness is fundamental to the process of choosing God and committing to practise Christianity. Being a Christian is articulated as being distinctive, which is beyond holding the right beliefs or acting ethically. It means becoming aware of the truth of Jesus and responding to it. Religiosity is thus clearly a mode of consciousness. Below are Nicholas’ and Lucy’s accounts of their conversions, which show them becoming aware of the truth of Christianity, coming to believe and the impact it had on their lives. Both

Nicholas and Lucy were suspicious of 'religion' and thought religious people were 'loonies'. Nicholas' conversion spurred him into founding Bethlehem with the intent of communicating Christianity as a way of life relevant to people today. The finding of truth, for Nicholas, was accompanied by a rejection of 'false religion', the religion of 'fire and brimstone'. Conversion is, here, coming to recognise what is true. Thus, we can see religiosity as a mode of consciousness, where belief is *belief in*, trust in God, which engenders a relationship with God. The relationship with God, for participants, grounds their search for authenticity.

Nicholas: 'Belief in'

When he was a teenager, Nicholas began to frequent the youth club of a church with his friends. The church had a café and they thought they could "have a good laugh at those Christians". He didn't grow up in a Christian family and thought that Christians were "a bit like flat earth society people". So, at first, he was surprised by the "rational thinking" of that group of Christians.

"... there was actual rational thinking. People there who understood my questions and surprised me by having answers, so from a number of conversations [...] I guess it was a sort of challenge, you know, you say you don't believe in God, but maybe he is there, why don't you try him? [...] *trust him. It's about trusting.* Pray and just see what happens. If he is there may be he'll do something. And *I prayed, I started to trust that may be he is there*, and I just felt different. [...] and the more I looked into what they were saying and claiming,

and what the bible was saying, the more it made sense to me. [...] I made that step of faith and say 'God, if you're there, I want all this' [...] and something happened. I felt, literally felt quite high [...] Today, 40 years on, how do I describe that? I don't know. At that time, it was a something that happened there, the spirit of God, is one way of looking at it, emotions is another one. Something happened, and probably a mixture of the two, that made me feel [...] I just felt different. [...] I mentioned to my family that I'd become a Christian. They just laughed and said 'don't worry, it'll pass'" (Nicholas, interview).

Nicholas refers to 'trusting that God is there'. Simmel explains that religious belief can be expressed in theoretical form, but that it is not "the content of a mental image"; rather it is "an emotional fusion with Him experienced as a *real event*" (Simmel 1902/1997, p. 130, emphasis in the original). This notion of religiosity and *belief in* God reveals belief as a change in one's mode of consciousness. It emphasises the emotional dimension of belief, as pointed out by Nicholas. Finally, it enables us to understand why Nicholas prayed although he had no belief. Simmel explained that: "[T]hanks to this interpretation – according to which religious belief is a form of existence, is a subjective process itself, and is not, as in theoretical knowledge, its content – all kinds of facts are explained that would otherwise be paradoxical. For example, there is prayer to obtain faith – completely senseless behaviour from the standpoint of common rationality because one evidently can address the prayer only to one in whom one already believes. ... But that one acts in this way proves that one prays to obtain something else, an actual inner reality, a transformation of the way we are

that finds in the holding of something to be true only a point of conscious support or an external reflection" (Simmel 1902/1997, pp. 130-131).

Nicholas felt that something had happened, he "felt quite high". It was a deeply emotional experience that gave a new direction to his life. It was not, however, 'once and for all'. Nicholas, at the time of the interview, had been going through a period of questioning his faith radically. He had doubted God's existence and realised how much "the life of faith is a journey". He struggled with faith, but found "living the Christian life [...] a million times better than anything else". Christianity is, here, a way of life, which requires self-transformation as part of one's relationship with God.

"So, even if I couldn't intellectually understand it, something in there is hugely attractive. [...] There's something about this I don't wanna lose and so I step back in faith and I hold on and, suddenly, I discover he (God) is still there and I can experience him" (Nicholas, interview).

During the interview, Nicholas asked me "why does God demand faith?" Would it not be better to have a permanent physical presence of God in the world at all time?" The narratives of my informants suggest that it is precisely the step of faith, Simmelian *belief in*, which leads to the path of authenticity, the attempt to be true to the ideal of following Jesus. Trust in God gives rise to a relationship with God, which is partly defined by theological ideas. Being a Christian, in the theological discourse of Bethlehem, is defined by having a relationship with Jesus and, therefore, having a personal experience of him. It is the

personal relationship with Jesus, which calls on Christians to be like him by forming relationships with others. The consciousness of being in a relationship with Jesus and of other relationships being part of serving God is pivotal in the performance of authenticity.

Being a Christian denotes a mode of consciousness. From an *emic* perspective, it means becoming aware of the truth of Jesus and imitating Jesus in one's daily life. That consciousness is an essential part of authenticity. Consciousness of one's relationship with Jesus drives the sense of self-transformation, or "maturing", of participants. As mentioned previously, the conscious choice of following Jesus engenders commitment to practise the authentic Christian life. Authenticity, from an *etic* perspective, identifies this process of gaining a cohesive identity by seeking to grasp truth in one's social and historical environment (social dimension), but also in a way that is meaningful to the person (individual dimension). Just as the 'social dimension' of (*emic*) authenticity required critical reflection on institutional religion and materialistic society, the 'individual dimension' of *emic* authenticity centres on gaining a Christian consciousness by breaking away from mind-sets that are seen as self-centred and shallow.

At the individual level, the discovery of the truth (of Christianity) is not simply about emotional and intellectual adherence to a religious tradition, but a transformed consciousness and attitude. It is a "spiritual journey", on which all Christians are travelling. One's personal transformation may simply be a deepening of one's understanding and practice of Christianity, or a more dramatic shift from a previous lifestyle to a "Christian lifestyle". For instance, Nancy, a member of the church, who made use of recreational

drugs, gave them up as a result of becoming a Christian. This was not an easy or linear process. Nevertheless, she adopted a different perspective that enabled her to change her behaviour. Lucy's account of her conversion is particularly dramatic. However, the stress in the narrative is not on an experience of the numinous, but on self-realisation.

Lucy: Becoming Oneself

Lucy comes from – what she described as – a ‘non-Christian’ family, who “only went to church for weddings and funerals and christenings”. She was not interested in religion. She began attending Bethlehem church for its parent and toddler group. After two years, a few people mentioned to her the ‘Alpha course’, an introductory course on Christianity. She told me that she was not looking for faith, but went because she is “not very good at saying no”. After a few weeks, she noticed a change in her. Although she “fought against it” and wondered whether she was being “brainwashed”, she began to believe. She recounted always being very volatile, shouting and swearing, especially in the car and then she found calm. Lucy's transformation is a stark example of authenticity as a process that restructures and intensifies one's identity. She became calmer by letting go of her sense of responsibility towards her children. The surrender to God instilled in her self-control.

“... as a family, we only went to church for weddings, funerals and christenings [...] so I had no interest at all. [...] I took the children to the nursery and mother and toddlers, still no interest. And then I think after the birth of my third child, I had made a lot of friends here. So, after two years of coming here, [...] three people [...] in the space of five minutes, said: ‘why

don't you come to the Alpha course? You only have to come to the first night, come and see if you're interested' [...] I knew lots of my friends would be there, so I went along to the supper and really enjoyed that. I probably went because I'm not very good at saying no, if I'm honest. I think within about two to three weeks, I knew that something really major was happening in me, which I didn't understand at all and I guess, at the beginning, I really fought against it. I thought: 'no, I didn't come for this. This isn't, I'm not, I'm not a Christian, this isn't how I think' and I thought: 'am I being brainwashed? Am I actually being just coerced into believing in this?' [...] In a period of about three weeks, I really moved from not really caring whether God existed to actually thinking: 'yes, he's real and he's there and he's trying to talk to me'. It's kind of strange because it was a very quick journey. I was not aware myself that I had changed, but my husband said: 'you're so different'. Cos I've always been a very volatile, up and down, up and down, up and down, and shout and swear, always really shout. In the car, really terrible, you know, beeping the horn and being aggressive. And it just left me. It just went. I stopped swearing. I just calmed down. I felt happier. [...] My family noticed, my friends noticed and they were saying: 'what's happened to you? You're really, you're really content'. Even my daughter, who was six at that time, said: 'mum, you're much nicer than you used to be.' And that was really shocking. [...] I can't even explain it. Something in my, it was like something deep in my heart that changed and I felt that all the anger, all the lack of patience, all the frustration had just been replaced by a sense of calm that

everything was ok and I wasn't a bad mother and I didn't have to try hard, because I was ok as I am. [...] At that time, I really didn't understand it, but I was quite happy [...] because I had changed for the better. [...] As time went on, [...] I borrowed a bible and I remember sitting for about three days and every time I opened it what I read really hit me, it was for me, it was about me. [...] I got to the point when I thought, d'you know, this is a real problem, because I'm not even challenging this, I'm just accepting this like a child, I'm not, I'm not even thinking about this as an adult. The next verse I read was from Luke where he says that 'we're expected to believe as children, not to question, but to believe as children.' To me that confirmed that it came from God, that this wasn't from within me, this was from outside of me. And that gave me a great peace". (Lucy, interview)

The above extract is an account of a rather dramatic conversion, which is not typical. People at Bethlehem have sometimes remarked that Lucy's change was very significant. It was not, however, a short-lived conversion experience; rather she has now been a Christian for over ten years. The perhaps extreme features of Lucy's account allow us to distinguish between 'individual authenticity' and 'self-transcendent authenticity'. 'Individual authenticity' refers to the attempt at being true to oneself (one's better self), in contrast with being true to universal truth by projecting oneself beyond one's immediate individuality and social context. The extract below shows Lucy's experience of Christianity, as a way to be true to her individual self, rather than a mystical experience. Lucy worked as a nurse for many years and has always had a desire to help others. Christianity provided her with validation.

“I think that my personality is a huge thing because, like I said, even as a child I liked to do things for other people. I’ve always had: ‘she’s very caring, she wants to help people’. And I did and maybe that was part of the change in me when I became a Christian that it was all kind of validated. It actually, you can live your life [...] with that personality, with that desire to help others without being weird. You know, it kind of gave it an expression, I suppose, in a way and [...] maybe that’s why it happened so quickly. I mean I thought about it so much that maybe because that was me and my personality and then it fitted, it all came together, it felt right, it felt [...] I’ve always wanted to kind of be able to help others and now I understand maybe why; maybe that was always in me for a reason. [...] the way life and the world is constructed is not easy to really express that without people thinking: ‘mhm, strange’ or that [...] you’re kind of doing for ulterior motives. And I think for me it was kind of ‘yeah, this is fine, this is what the Christian life is all about’ [...] you’re not just out for yourself, but you’re almost going to the other side and give yourself [...] in small ways for someone else, without expecting anything back” (Lucy, interview).

Lucy identifies the ethic of compassion as a key aspect of Christianity and what makes Christianity distinctive. Accordingly, within the Christian environment what may seem “weird” in the world outside becomes the norm. Christianity allows the expression of love and compassion, which, for Lucy, is the living out not only of faith, but of her own “personality”. Thus, Christianity is liberating for Lucy and, in her opinion, for humanity as a

whole ('self-transcendent authenticity'), because human beings "want to be cared for and want to be nurtured and protected". Lucy does not see Christianity as the only framework that legitimises compassion, although compassion is characteristic of Christian authenticity. By stressing its opposition to a competitive environment outside, where caring acts can be mistaken for the pursuit of self-interest, Lucy demarcates authenticity from the 'falsehood' of leading a self-interested life. Authentic Christian life frees the person to go beyond the logic of competition and wealth accumulation. By being a Christian, Lucy can thus be "true to herself".

4. The 'Self-Transcendent' Dimension

The self-transcendent dimension hinges on the believer having a sense of awe for 'something bigger', the recognition of human finitude, of being 'this side' while having a sense of going beyond it (cf. chapter four). The move towards the 'other side', never achieved, is likened by participants to 'relinquishing control' (Lucy) and 'death and rebirth' (Arthur). Self-transcendence, within the religious framework, is grounded on the religious actor's trust in God and gives expression to the religious sentiment, described as *pietas* by Simmel. The sentiment of *pietas* was, for Simmel, a composite attitude containing "a peculiar mixture of unselfish surrender and fervent desire, of humility and exaltation, of sensory concreteness and spiritual abstraction" (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 161). Simmel's sentiment of *pietas* captures the believer's sense of dependence on God. The relinquishing

control of my informants is an expression of that sentiment. The self-transcendence in the examples provided, entails the surrender of the self.

Lucy: Self-surrender

“I’ve always wanted children. I loved being with my children, but there was always a part of me thinking: ‘is this it? Is it gonna be like this for 10 years?’ It’s just give, give, give. And no matter how wonderful your children are, it’s giving and giving and giving. It’s never enough and that was perhaps the root to a lot of my frustration. And that was the biggest change in me. I thought: ‘even being a mother to these children is an act of service. It’s something I should do gladly [...] they are not actually my children. These are individual people that happened to have been born to me and my husband, but they are not my possessions, they are not my burden. My whole perception changed, even on what being a mother was. I was just the one who had been tasked, or trusted, to help them grow up” (Lucy, interview).

Lucy’s “recognition” that her children are not her “possessions” and that she is “tasked” to bring them up inserts her and her task of child-rearing within the religious perspective. Lucy realises that she is not a “bad mother”, she is “ok”, for she goes beyond understanding her life as confined to the “here and now”. Her role of mother is part of God’s design. Her life is transformed by going beyond the finite perspective of this world or, in Simmelian terms, ‘this side’. Self-transcendence, however, is not other-worldly; rather it ‘elevates’

concrete reality, in this case child-rearing. The movement of self-transcendence, which inserts Lucy in a dimension that is beyond concrete reality, not only frees Lucy from feeling inadequate and burdened by her daily tasks, but also gives value to those tasks. Lucy's changed perspective, however, is not simply a form of personal development or self-fulfilment. She gives up control and recognises that she does not 'own' her life and, indeed, her children. Lucy's self-transcendence happens through self-surrender. This may be reminiscent of mystical theologies, such as that of Meister Eckhart, where the self is 'annulled' in God. However, there is not a mystical sublimation of the self, the self does not cease to exist in God, nor is there an abdication of one's will; rather individuality is enhanced by relinquishing the sense of control over one's life .

Therefore, self-transcendent authenticity is not just about being true to oneself, but about going beyond the self and being true to truth, however truth is understood. Religion inserts the person within the wider historical perspective of the religious tradition and also within the transcendent perspective of truth. Lucy comes to recognise Christianity as true and this changes her perception deeply. Being a Christian calls for a new identity or, at least, one that is aware of the spiritual dimension in everyday life. This is evident in the next section, where Arthur describes the self-transcendent dimension of authenticity as a metaphorical death and rebirth. He stresses that self-transcendence is part of one's relationship with God. He also explains that the fulfilment of one's potential is not to be seen as self-fulfilment, "like some self-help philosophy"; rather it is linked to something "eternal". It is the realisation of one's potential that is in accordance with what God wants people to be.

Arthur: "Death and Rebirth"

"... he sees, he sees my life, its warts, its failures, not failures, its frailties. But I also think God takes a lot of delight in seeing the potential in us, in everyone of us, I believe, occasionally being released. That, to me, is incredibly authentic and incredibly privileged position. I think all that I've got is God given. I make him, cos it's relational, I know that I make him sad for want of a better expression, like we do with our human relationships. [...] But there's nothing more fulfilling in my view than seeing people, you know, you love and care for or grow in a relationship with, you see them flowering in their potential [...] God sees us all like that, like little children, you know, when we start to release, sorry, fulfil potential that he's put within us, which I think it's unlimited as well, he smiles and he enjoys that; he enjoys seeing us becoming more and more the type of person that he intends us to be. [...] It's not like some self-help philosophy or whatever. To me, it's more genuine than that, it's more linked to something which is supernatural, eternal and yet it's real now, in the here and now. [...] I'll never forget the sermon by this old minister. He said unless you wanna enter the kingdom of heaven you need to be like the seed and the seed needs to die to re-grow. And there's a wonderful picture there of death and then out of the death comes new life. I thought this, this is just me. I don't think I'm bad, but if I want to really know God, to have this relationship with him, rather than just knowledge, I need to die to myself and I'll be reborn. And I think God's spirit then touched me for the first time. And it's been a process ever since. Some days

I really struggle, sometimes it's not so much of a struggle. I think I grow more and more aware all the time".

The becoming aware of the truth of God, which is beyond one's immediate experience, moves the believer to self-transcendence. Thus, the relationship is felt as causing a metaphorical death and rebirth. In this case, it is a process of moral development that Arthur defines as "present continuous" to emphasise its on-going nature. Authenticity is thus not an essence or a state to be attained, but a process that moulds one's existential identity. The person needs to go beyond the self continuously. Arthur's (*emic*) framework of authenticity is the theological notion of sanctification. Accordingly, the believer goes through a process of transformation when they come to recognise the truth of Christianity and to have a relationship with Jesus, which is lived out in human relationships. This theological transformation of the self of the believer rests on the idea that Jesus has saved believers with his sacrifice thus bridging the gap between human beings and God.

According to the local understanding of salvation, human beings are "broken" – as informants say – and not deserving of heaven on their own merit. They can never be "good enough" to be saved. This is based on a particular reading of the Old Testament, according to which humans are burdened by the original sin. Salvation by adhering to God's demands is unattainable; it can only come from Jesus' forgiveness of sins through the substitutionary atonement¹⁸. The believer is saved as a result of Jesus' death being a substitution for the punishment of believers. Belief in Jesus, however, not only brings eternal salvation but

¹⁸ There are different views of the 'substitutionary atonement' within Christianity. Like all other theological ideas mentioned here, the notion reported above reflects the local culture.

transformation of the person through the process of sanctification. Sanctification is the process of transformation of the person enacted by the Holy Spirit.

Sanctification is a process whereby the Holy Spirit grants believers the “fruits of the spirit”, as Nicholas explained in his interview, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, humility and self-control. These characteristics “grow” in the person who “submits” to God. Faced with inherent human brokenness, the Christian believer submits to Jesus to receive forgiveness and salvation. Surrender is a crucial aspect of self-transformation. Complete sanctification comes with eternal life. In contrast with theological sanctification, *etic* self-transcendence is the sense of going beyond one’s finitude. Thus, self-transcendence is not limited to Christians or, indeed, to religious people. Self-transcendent authenticity is a process of identity formation, whereby actors have a feeling of awe and acknowledge ‘something bigger’. This moves the person to go beyond the self to attain a connection with what is understood to be truth. Authenticity represents the aspiration of transcendence of the mundane; the glimpsing at a wider horizon of truth. It is not other-worldly; rather it makes transcendence “immanent” (cf. chapter four).

5. Discussion

The application of the concept of authenticity, as a three-dimensional process of identity formation, to ethnographic data and interviews reveals different aspects of individuals’

religious identity. Authenticity does not stop at the individual's inner search and emotional experiences; it is a more complex process that includes one's social as well as individual identity. The role of religious tradition is fundamental to the process. However, tradition should not be understood as adherence to norms and practices; rather it results from an active interpretation and legitimisation on the part of believers. Tradition is the framework through which actors glimpse the truth. It comprises customs, rituals, beliefs, laws and ethical principles that enable the religious person to have a relationship with the divine. Religious actors engage with tradition emotionally and intellectually at the individual and at the group level.

The commitment to authenticity is an attempt at translating truth by interpreting tradition. This work of interpretation reflects the social context of religious actors, their individual personality, and the individual's striving for a universal horizon. Accordingly, the interpretation of truth by religious actors through tradition reflects inevitably their social context, but it is also a deliberate attempt to make sense of tradition in the light of contemporary life. Tradition's norms, narratives and practices need to be "relevant" to people's lives. In turn, the process of interpreting and applying tradition in every generation guarantees its continuity in time, by making tradition relevant in every generation. In other words, the forms change to preserve what is seen as the substance of religion, which, in this case study, is the truth of Jesus.

The first section showed how contemporary social and ethical concerns regarding the competitive and materialistic aspects of Western society are used to formulate Christian

authenticity. The group identifies the authentic ethics of Christianity, in cooperative human relations, by discarding the false ethics of materialism of mainstream society. The references to obedience point to the sovereignty of the ethics of Jesus over and above society's ethics. Jesus is seen by the group as love and compassion, which come to identify Christian authenticity. Consequently, the ethos of Bethlehem church is to be a caring and welcoming church (Appendix B), open to all, and accepting of people. The church seeks to practise love and compassion by providing a sense of community for church members as well as for local residents. The compassionate Christianity of Bethlehem is focussed on being caring and compassionate, which is contrasted with – what is felt to be – the selfish individualism of Western society.

Christianity is “countercultural” because it reflects divine ethics, rather than human ethics. It is a call to be like Jesus in the world. This compassionate Christianity is also the basis on which Lucy constructs her authentic self. Here, tradition is interpreted in the light of the social context of the church, but also of one's individuality. For Lucy, her personal attitude of compassion towards others finds expression in being a Christian. Thus, at the individual level, the search for authenticity involves being true to truth that speaks to oneself and validates one's personality. The individual dimension of authenticity provides unity to the self and self-understanding within the religious framework of tradition. It is subjective, for the truth of Christianity needs to be experienced by the person emotionally and intellectually and ring true to the individual. It is also objective in as far as it is an interpretation of a shared tradition.

An interesting aspect of the process of authenticity is the relinquishing of control over one's life that has the paradoxical effect of intensifying one's individuality. The surrender to God is not a feature only of self-transcendence, as mystical accounts may convey. On the contrary, it is present at the social level, where participants reflect on the recognition of the sovereignty of God and that everything is a gift from God. Surrender is present at the individual level, when Lucy embraces the Christian framework that allows her to be herself. At the self-transcendent level, Arthur shows how authenticity requires "death and rebirth" to truly appreciate one's relationship with God; while, for Lucy, self-transcendence enables her to inscribe her task of bringing up her children in a different perspective.

The self-transcendent dimension of authenticity lets us glimpse at the human sensation of awe, the recognition of 'something bigger' and true. Self-transcendence thus means gaining a 'higher', or 'deeper', degree of consciousness of truth – however understood by the actor. The move of self-transcendence gives the believer a wider perspective. In the present case, self-transcendence refers to the believer's relationship with Jesus, which calls for being like him. This is impossible to achieve in its fullness; it thus becomes a continuous attempt to re-awaken one's consciousness. Authenticity is a fleeting moment, for human beings cannot be constantly aware of truth and living according to truth. They cannot be self-transcendent in every moment. Authenticity is a constant effort on the part of the believer to connect with and understand truth. Believers connect and relate with the divine by being in relationship with it. It is a deeply personal endeavour which needs to "ring true" to the person, as put by Selina. It also needs to stir the person to go beyond her usual mind-set

and way of acting. The sense of self-transcendence allows the believer to experience the divine in the here and now.

Thus, the experience of self-transcendence is a very immanent one. Yet, authenticity is not confined to emotional and mystical experiences of the numinous; rather the acknowledgement of truth beyond immediate experience entails a doing. Authenticity is always sought and performed, rather than attained. It is a process of identity formation, which requires commitment in everyday life. The self is not sublimated in the overarching truth, or God. It is not annulled, but reinforced, as a “follower of Jesus”, who commits to serve God. Authenticity is not an exercise in self-authority or individual choice; it requires surrender of the self, which is an acknowledgement of one’s finitude, to then commit to God. It is a constant effort to be “servant of God”. The person thus forms her authentic identity as a Christian, through a process of interpretation of tradition, socially and individually, and through the emotional and intellectual experience of being in relationship with Jesus, grounded in awe: the awareness of ‘something bigger’ and true.

5. Conclusions

The individual makes sense of truth (Jesus) through a process of identity formation, which involves interpretation of tradition. Tradition is ‘social’ and socially constructed, thus developing over time. However, the overarching narrative of any tradition is to serve as the

way to truth, which, in the present case study, is Jesus. The interpretation of truth by religious actors needs to be consonant with the social context, and thus relevant to today's life. It also needs to connect with the emotions and intellect of the individual. It also needs to point to a universal horizon of truth that can enable the person to transcend herself and her immediate social reality.

Self-transcendence is based on the feeling of awe for 'something bigger', the sensation of humans being 'this side' only, and the ability to think of something 'beyond'. Lucy and Arthur show that self-transcendence is experienced as a surrender of the self. However, the relinquishing of control over one's life is to 'regain it', thus the surrender effects an intensification of individuality. This may have the effect of self-fulfilment, but that is not its rationale. Self-fulfilment is but an outcome of acting according to one's 'new' consciousness. Self-transcendent authenticity is a change in consciousness, which is articulated in a different way of thinking and acting. Accordingly, Lucy sees child-rearing as a task, part of God's design. The surrender of the self has the effect of intensifying one's individuality, but it also connects the individual to a universal horizon of truth, which in this case is understood through the figure of Jesus.

My informants understand the truth of Christianity as, at the same time, universal and particular. The tension between universality and particularism, already seen in the previous chapter, is at the core of the conception of Christian authenticity. As mentioned, Jesus embodies the overarching ethics of compassion. My informants recognise that compassion is present in people of other religions and in people who are not religious; yet

Christianity offers a privileged path to truth, due to the sanctification process of the Holy Spirit that transforms the person. It contains a universally valid truth, which can be known by non-Christians, but which requires a specifically Christian framework for its fuller appreciation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is diversity among participants in formulating and dealing with this question. I thus suggest that Christian authenticity is best understood as a privileged framework for the knowledge and experience of truth.

Chapter Ten

Authentic Ethics

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined authenticity in its social, individual and self-transcendent dimensions. It has been argued that authenticity is not a state or a quality, but a process of identity construction. Such identity is relational, although its relationality is not limited to social relations, but also to one's individuality and one's understanding of truth (through one's interpretation of tradition). In this thesis, I proposed to understand religiosity (*Religiosität*) as sensitivity to self-transcendence. The self-transcendent dimension refers to the awareness of 'this side', to which I connect the sense of awe (*pietas*), the sense of 'something bigger' of the religious sentiment (cf. chapter four). Self-transcendence is not 'neutral' or confined to one's inner feelings; it is inscribed within one's religious culture, which, in this case study, means "following Jesus". This chapter focuses on the ethical dimension of authenticity, as evidenced by Arthur's reflections.

Arthur's extract, in chapter nine, reveals the process of authenticity as a process of moral development. 'Following Jesus' means making a conscious decision of having a relationship with Jesus, which is lived out in practice. Self-transcendence calls for conscious action in accordance with the ideal of Jesus. The ensuing action is called serving, which is explored in this chapter. Serving is constructed as authentic action by individual religious actors and the group. The empirical data show how actors engage with religious tradition in forming their own identity. Actors do not accept religious norms, narratives and practices supinely. Indeed, the process of sacralisation (cf. chapter seven) helps us appreciate how tradition rests on individual actors granting religious significance to norms, narratives and practices and thus legitimising them.

Authenticity thus rests on sacralisation, the process whereby individuals engage with tradition attributing value to it and legitimising it. Accordingly, for something to be authentic, it needs to be recognised as a legitimate part of tradition, but also enabling authenticity in the present time. Sacralisation does not necessarily imply that sacralised ideas and practices are ethical; rather they are a valuable and legitimate part of tradition. However, as the data show, (*emic*) authenticity is a process of moral development. Authenticity, in this case study, is grounded in ethics, and, in particular, in the ethic of compassion. In contrast with the ethic of purity, which is norm-oriented, the ethic of compassion is person-oriented. The final section thus explores the distinctiveness of Christian authenticity through the idea of compassion.

2. The Ethical Concerns of Authenticity

In the course of three years of observation, I rarely encountered a discussion on ethics. Even when probed, during interviews, participants did not spell out the ethical rationale for action nor the underlying ethical principles. We may argue that this suggests that ethics is ‘assumed’, in the sense that it is not felt necessary to articulate the ethical rationale for one’s behaviour. This might seem redundant if we conflate religion with ethics, but, as argued in chapter seven, not all religious norms and behaviours are ethical. Rituals, norms, symbols are not necessarily of ethical value nor do they have an ethical rationale. A ritual may have an experiential value and purpose. It may be of uttermost importance in invoking the divine, such as prayer, without having ethical value. Religious experiences may focus the person’s mind to follow ethical precepts, but are not ethical in and of themselves. They can be considered ethically neutral.

Emic authenticity has ethical connotations whilst *etic* authenticity is not determined by ethical content, although it may include it, and regards ethics as not necessarily shared by the wider community. Accordingly, in the previous chapter, Arthur’s description of authenticity captures a process of moral development. The experience of the divine does not exhaust authenticity; being authentic thus requires commitment to a moral lifestyle. The most explicit references to ethics are in the examples below. The first is from the interview with Felix, when he recounts his effort of reviving the soup run for the homeless and Godwin’s explanation of what Christianity is for him.

“They just couldn’t run it anymore, you know, we were literally gonna say ‘well, the people aren’t here, we won’t do it anymore’, but it was, this was a slightly different case where, as a pastor, I thought: ‘*as a church, we should be involved with caring for poor people* and we’re not doing much in that area and here is one of the few bits we’re doing, so let’s try and keep that alive’. So, I went down myself. I shared it with the church, suddenly there were 14 people who came forward and said: ‘look, we really wanna help’. So it’s a fantastic, thriving ministry now, but it, it almost died, I mean ...” (Felix, interview).

“... for me Christianity is about reaching out to people, it’s about *feeding the hungry*, it’s about *clothing the poor*, it’s about whatever it means to make life better for people, whatever it means. Ultimately, it would be great then if those people buy into Christianity, but if they don’t, I believe, that we’ve given a little bit of Jesus Christ to them. We made their lives better. That’s how I live my Christian life”. (Godwin, interview).

When mentioned explicitly, action was rarely within the frame of a moral dilemma over which course of action to take. This is not to say that research participants did not face moral dilemmas or did not have doubts on how to act, but that doubts were often framed as a personal sense of inadequacy or failure when confronted by a difficult situation. They reflected a personal struggle. Arthur, referring, in his interview, to the gap between what he says and what he does, called it “part of the wrestle for me about Christianity”. It is not,

however, merely a question of sincerity; rather it captures the performative nature of authenticity. Authenticity is a way of thinking, but also a way of doing. It is a 'doing', which implies intentionality: the consciousness of one's actions being a reflection of one's relationship with God. Thus, authentic action is intentional, rather than casual. Being an authentic Christian requires the awareness of the spiritual significance of one's actions. Accordingly, serving is not "good works" to merit heaven, but the practice of being a follower of Jesus.

Home Group discussion, 24th June 2009

Celia: "as a Christian I have absolutely no doubt about my salvation. But it doesn't mean there is no challenge daily in how we act. Am I out there using those gifts he has given me? I want him to find me using those gifts, being a mother, what he would want me to do, becoming the person he wants me to be".

Camden: "make sure your actions show Jesus".

Serving is often described as "putting others' needs before one's own". Although what constitutes serving is not clear cut, it is inherently moral. Above all, serving is the attempt to practise authenticity. As such, it is marked by a specific frame of mind, according to which the action is to serve God. Below are a few explanations and definitions of serving from participants' interviews.

“What is serving? I think *it’s preferring someone else’s needs to your own* and not necessarily thinking of yourself as better than people, [...] always thinking about others as better than yourself. I don’t think that we’ve got that sort of ‘summed up’, I don’t think Christians do it by any sense, but I think that’s the end deal [...] what you can do to help them (others) in whatever situation. And I see it as doing it for God when I do it for someone else”. (Dorothea, interview).

“What’s the difference between serving and caring? I think [...] I’m the centre manager here and under a normal business model [...] I would have people under me who would do the rolling their sleeves up [...], but that’s not the model that we hold up to here. [...] If I walk into the kitchen and the kitchen staff are busy, I roll my sleeves up and worked the dishwasher. [...] I think *it’s about putting yourself in somebody else’s shoes*, it’s about what it takes for me to make sure the team operates well, that we work well together. It can be throwing bodies at tasks, but it can also mean, *I’ve gotta do some stuff that I probably I don’t wanna do*: take the rubbish out, do the dishwasher, you know. *Serving is about making everybody else’s burden lighter*, making their work easier. [...] that’s what Christianity is all about”. (Godwin, interview).

“The whole serving thing to me is [...] a kind of an *attitude* really: *what you do, you do to please God. And sometimes the things you do to please God are not necessarily the things you would have wanted to do or chosen to do, but you know that it’s the right thing* and [...] there’s a kind of a real joy in that. [...] I really do

not wanna do this or you had to do it at the expense of something that you would rather do, but there's a kind of a sense deep within that 'yeah, this is the right thing to do, this is what God wanted me to do'. So I think, yes, serving is definitely, *it's like an act of devotion*, without sounding too holy, that is, it's something I want to please God. *God's done so much in my life* that I want to use my life to, to do good things in his name. I don't want people to say 'oh Lucy is such a good person'. I want to say '*God's amazing, look what he's enabled her to do, look how he uses her*'. Whereas sometimes *giving is [...] we do for our own gratification*. Perhaps we need that in a certain way, to be built up, but I think the service is really about where I stand before God and where he's kind of pushing me and nudging me to do". (Lucy, interview).

(referring to the parent and toddler 'ministry') "How is it a ministry? [...] I love the little ones, I do, don't get me wrong, I love them very much and, but it's not my sole reason in doing it, [...] but my heart is for the families in the community, [...] it's such a time in life when you can feel very isolated, [...] my heart is that they might come to know God, they might come to know of the saviour that loves them and, [...] *they might experience God's love for them, as well as meeting them on a human level* [...] providing somewhere where they can come and feel comfortable and at ease and get to know some other people". (Celia, interview).

The above extracts all explain serving as putting someone else's needs before one's own.

The action may include something one does not want to do. It is an effort which becomes

effortless because, as Lucy says, it is done to serve God. God enables the person to be selfless. Serving is doing something for others, but avoiding doing something for one's own gratification. Thus, the motivation is fundamental to the act. Authenticity, as mentioned, presupposes intentionality: the path of authenticity requires the believer to choose and commit to follow Jesus. Thus, for it to be serving, action needs to be carried out with religious intention, with an awareness of its spiritual significance. It is not merely directed to the recipient, but it serves God. Spiritually, the action contributes to building the Kingdom of God. Serving, in turn, raises one's awareness of the spiritual significance of all of one's actions.

The participants' reflections on serving also point to the particular form serving takes: that of loving others. Therefore, it is not a mere act of devotion to God, as prayer might be; rather it requires a recipient. It is within a relational framework. The way serving is constructed in Bethlehem is characterised by a strong focus on caring for people. Serving is "the essence of Christianity", as expressed by Selina in her interview, and, most importantly, it is when Christianity is "genuine" (Selina) or, we may add, authentic. Serving is "doing things to make people better" (Lucy, interview), but it is in service to God. Thus, one's sentiment of devotion towards God is externalised and projected in one's relationships with others. The authentic Christian aims to see others as God sees them and for others to "see something of Jesus in us", as put by Celia; so that "they might experience God's love for them". Relationships are not ends in themselves, but a way in which Christians try to follow the example of Jesus by loving others.

3. The Sacralisation of Authenticity

Serving is the practice of authenticity in Christian life. Authenticity, as mentioned, rests on sacralisation, the recognition of a practice or a belief as authentic part of tradition. Thus, sacralisation imposes boundaries on authenticity. For a practice or belief to be considered authentic, they need to be seen as a legitimate part of the tradition, but also to be relevant to the believer's life. Thus, individual religious actors play a role in shaping and constructing their tradition and granting legitimacy to specific practices and beliefs. The example below illustrates the fuzzy boundaries of authenticity. The exchange is taken from a group discussion on an episode from a DVD series on how to be a Christian, called *Living Distinctively*, which focussed on environmental issues. There was general agreement that care for the environment was important as were issues of fair trade, inequality in the world, and resource management. However, there was disagreement as to its level of priority and the theological framework in which to understand environmental concerns. The DVD featured a woman living in a house with some land for growing vegetables and rearing pigs.

Home group discussion, 15th June 2011

Camden asks: "What do you honestly think about Ruth?" (the environmentalist in the DVD)

Elinor: "She wasn't that radical, apart from the pigs"

Arthur: "this is one of the subjects where we have stereotypical images. [...]
They get a bad press"

Harriet: "the media often portray environmental campaigns as done
aggressively"

Camden: "it must be hard for the kids growing up thinking that the pigs reared
in the allotment will get killed"

Winifred: "I don't think so, I grew up like that and I have no problem eating
them"

Tertius: "the stress is on buying local, but this has a huge impact on *the third
world* which relies on us buying non-locally"

Camden: (reading from the DVD booklet) "How does attitude to environment
reflect theology?"

Rosamond: "I've never thought about it. *It's stressful enough when you're going
shopping to look at where it comes from*"

Nicholas: *"I'm not convinced by her view of theology"*

Will: "it would have been helpful if they had quoted scripture"

(Winifred reads some verses from the Bible)

Camden: "it's about *stewardship*. We can't be wasteful, we can't be careless. *It's ultimately about being ethical to our fellow-man*"

Arthur: *"for our society it is as cheap as you can"* (consumer goods)

Harriet: "... and *people can't afford it* as it is now"

Nicholas: "food prices are going to go up with the economy of India and China growing. We might not be able to care about the environment if feeding the family becomes difficult. I think the bigger issue is resource management [...] energy..."

Harriet: "it's got to be an individual's decision. As a society we cannot possibly do it, because there's such a difference between those who can afford it and those who can't"

(The discussion turns to 'fair-trade')

Mary: "I don't want to be cynical, but it's fair-trade to a point. They (farmers) are not getting the right amount. ..."

Arthur: "there is huge inequality in the world. I wonder what he (God) thinks about that"

Celia: "what she's (Ruth) saying is that that *it comes from our heart*, to reflect how we understand God"

Harriet: "I agree with you. *Different things touch you. I prefer giving to the poor* than spending hours checking where things come from"

Camden: "what are the more important commitments?"

(Winifred reads from the booklet a statement on the environment being part of being a Christian)

Camden: "we focus too much on food, what about travelling to work?"

(Camden proposes an exercise of spending 10 minutes thinking of what people can do to make their life choices more sustainable with regards to food, travel, and energy consumption)

Camden: *"If Jesus were around today, would he go around the supermarket looking at where things come from? I'm not convinced that the answer is yes"*

"Yes, he would", replied, his wife, Winifred.

Tertius is not convinced: "This is all very well but 'we're making a mess of everything else. What about people who have nothing in Africa?"

Winifred clearly saw environmental issues as a legitimate part of being a Christian. The environment, for Winifred, should be part of the sacred framework. However, during the discussion, this seemed not to be shared by the majority of the group. Although the group agreed that respect for the environment was important and everybody should adopt a more sustainable lifestyle, care for the environment was not sacralised. I suggest that there are three main reasons for this. In the first instance, there is uncertainty, among group members, as to what should be deemed a sustainable lifestyle. The group lacked clear guidelines and criteria upon which to judge the best policy. For example, the focus on buying local produce is questioned in the light of the importance of international trade for the sustenance of the 'third world'. There were also comments on the price for sustainable consumption, such as organic products, which are not affordable for all.

Arthur highlighted how "for our society it is as cheap as you can", thus environmental concerns clash with consumerism. However, in the eyes of participants, the price of an

environmentally-friendly lifestyle seems to confine issues of sustainability to the few rather than the many. In the second instance, environmental concerns are not seen as part of the theological discourse, as shown by Nicholas' doubts regarding the theological grounding of environmentalism. That evening there were 13 people present, so the turn-out was good and the discussion was representative of the group in the case study. However, subsequent conversations revealed a wider support for Winifred's position. The lack of time to discuss the issue prevented the group from seeing environmental concerns within Christian tradition. The environment is becoming increasingly part of evangelical concerns (Pally 2011; Smith and Johnson 2010; Harden 2005); nevertheless the group did not have access to environmental theologies and time to reflect on them.

In the third instance, serving is primarily conceived as giving to other human beings. The 'poor' are seen much more as a priority, especially if in the 'third world', as the comments by Harriet and Tertius show. Indeed, the charity action in which Bethlehem church is involved relates mostly to missions in Africa. The long-standing concern for the poor and the tradition of missionary work inscribe action aimed at relieving of poverty within the sacred framework. In particular, Africa occupies a prominent place in Christian evangelical imagery, which is explored in the next section.

4. Africa and Authenticity

Africa was often mentioned during the discussion, reported in the previous section, over the importance of environmental concerns for Christians. It has a special place in the hearts of my informants that is unsurpassed by anything else. Several of them have spent prolonged periods of time (from one month to a year) in missions in Africa engaging in very practical and, often, heavy labour to aid African villages. Although it is acknowledged that there is need for charity in many other places, including the UK, Africa is invested with religious significance. The extracts below offer a glimpse on various aspects of authenticity. They all come from Arthur's interview, where he recounts the first time he went to Africa with the organisation Samaritans' First. He was met by a young woman working for the organisation, who explained the challenge they faced and stressed the frustration that might arise from a 'Western' attitude of 'fixing things' when faced with the inability to solve problems.

"She said: 'probably, most of what you're used to doing it in terms of your society is fixing things.' [...] That's what you're paid to do, that's what I'm paid to do in work. [...] She said: 'You're gonna see things you've never seen ever before. Some of those things are quite disturbing, actually they are all pretty disturbing in the great scheme of things.' She said: 'I suspect most of you are going to revert back to yourself, your normal type, *you're gonna fix this.*' She said: 'you will not be able to fix this, what you see, cos the scale of the challenge is so vast that it

might just knock you completely. It can shake your faith, it could, could psychologically really cause a bit of discomfort.' Then she opened the bible and she told the story about Jesus and the 5000 people, they didn't have any food. [...] You've got five loaves of bread, two fishes, loads of people. The automatic reaction is 'ok, we can't do any of that. It's a waste of time, but they brought them to Jesus and, how it happened I don't know I don't even really wanna go down the road of trying to explain it, but the principle here is *he took something that seemed a total waste of time and multiplied it* to such an extent that there were baskets and baskets, leftovers. And the principle was *sometimes all we can do is bring to, bring to God our limited offering* that's pathetic and stupid, seemingly hopeless as that might be and he has, because he's so different, he's God, on a different plane to our thinking, to our mentality, he was able to do all sorts of things. That was unbelievable for me. *That was major shaping of my mind-set really, my heart, attitude and also my understanding of the greatness of God.* Also probably my own, man generally, willingness to trust him, because we could do an awful lot more by trusting and by giving what we do have [...] But my contribution, what God's called me to do, I think *he's called me to make a contribution in whatever way that is, bring my little bag of seemingly inconsequential offerings* that I lay before the king of kings and the lord of all creation. And *I don't actually know what he's gonna do with it.*" (Arthur, interview)

There are two important points I wish to highlight on this passage. Firstly, the culture of being in control, typical of the West, as exemplified by the idea of 'fixing it', is considered meaningless before utter deprivation. To be able to work face to face with extreme poverty, one is required to relinquish control and accept that one's action is but a drop in the ocean. Secondly, Arthur presents it as a turning point in his knowledge of God. He felt in awe of God, as he came to terms with his own finitude. It is a moment of personal spiritual growth, when Arthur understands that all he can do is to bring his "inconsequential offerings" without knowing what will come of them. Thus, faith is, here, trust in God; rather than *belief that* God exists or that God intervenes to help the needy. God may 'multiply' what one brings, but *belief in* God is an attitude born out of awe. This sentiment calls for transcendence of one's self-authority to act in accordance with the ideal of Jesus. The transcendence of the self inscribes the person within the religious framework giving rise to what is felt to be an authentic identity. In this case study, the local narratives of authenticity construct a moral identity. As Arthur puts it, authenticity happens when "men and women being made in God's image [...] reflect something of God's characteristics" (interview).

"... *To be moulded and shaped for good*, I know these things Francesca are very subjective, but I think the changes in my character from what would be, if I wasn't a Christian, to what is *work in progress*, now are just massive. I'm so glad that even if it must be frustrating to God at times cos I don't, I'm not changing as quickly as ... It's not change, I'm not being *refined* as, maybe, as speedily as he would like. But I just know they're good, *they're good* and *I feel fulfilled*. [...] I just know there's a load of impurity left within me that God is constantly blasting

with a big [...] kind of hot flame in order to [...] He's looking to create in all of us something that's precious. *It's not free from pain, it's not free from stress* and whatever, but it's precious nonetheless. I know someone would argue that's a contradiction, but to me that's part of life. This progress going through."

Authenticity is, here, presented as living out one's relationship with God by fulfilling one's spiritual and moral potential. The relationship with the divine sets in motion the process of moral development, which is a work in progress of being "refined" rather than changed. The use of the word 'refine' refers to a song from a verse in the bible (Malachi 3, 2¹⁹). From a theological point of view, the 'refinement' is the effect of 'sanctification' born out of the relationship with God. The context of Africa brings to light the inner process of authenticity, which is not merely acting in accordance to ethical principles, but becoming aware of the spiritual dimension of one's life. Africa is the 'Other', the opposite of comfortable life in the UK. It is bare and raw. Stripped of Western materialism, it is *the* place of faith, where "things" and "society" do not obstruct the relationship between believers and God. It provides a source of intense religious experience. Serving in Africa is not merely an act of charity, but a way to 'find oneself'.

Thus, Africa has a transformative power. However, the inner transformation of the believer is not for one's personal sake, but to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and to be in a relationship with God. Africa offers the opportunity to 'surrender' to God. The overwhelming poverty of African villagers, but also their faith has a shattering impact on

¹⁹ "But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap".

the consciences of those who have been there. It is a powerful experience of humility that transforms the person. The human struggle for survival is a reminder of the inconsequentiality of humanity. Human beings have no real control over their own destiny. Yet, once again, it is in acknowledging one's powerlessness that one's individual autonomy is intensified. It is intensified by one's awareness of the truth of God.

It has been argued that authenticity is a process of identity construction, which rests on the interpretation of tradition by religious actors. It requires awareness of what the actors understand as truth, however it is not exhausted by experience of the numinous. On the contrary, authenticity is consciousness of one's religious identity and ensuing action. Authenticity calls for action that reflects one's awareness of truth. *Emic* authenticity is thus a process of moral development. Informants consider the ethical attitude underpinning authenticity distinctive of Christianity and, yet, of universal value. Although the ethics present at Bethlehem church are nuanced, *emic* authenticity is primarily articulated as an attitude of compassion. Compassion is the principle underpinning serving. Being a Christian, as explored in chapter eight, is lived out in human relationships where the person 'embraces' the other (cf. chapter seven), who experiences God's love for them. The next section thus examines more closely the 'ethic of compassion'.

5. The ‘Ethic of Compassion’

This section explores the type of ethics that guides authenticity. It is, of course, difficult to assess ethical decision-making in the private lives of individuals. It would have been too intrusive to follow participants, at work or at home, to gather data on their moral behaviour. It would have also created an artificial situation, where participants would have felt self-conscious. However, instances of caring, especially among participants were clearly prominent. For instance, Celia told me of a time when she was ill and members of the home group brought food for her and her family for a week to the amazement of their neighbours. Similarly, during the fieldwork I recorded that the home group organised a food rota to help out Elinor after the birth of her child. After a fire that destroyed the interior of Lucy’s house, people from the church hosted Lucy and her family and continued to provide food and support for weeks, as Lucy recounts in the first extract. Caring is underpinned by – what I term – an ethic of compassion that inspires recognition of the dignity of the person. This is evident in Celia’s remarks commenting on her ministry in the parent and toddler group, in the second extract.

“We ate somewhere different every night. People fed us, people took my washing, people bought books for the children. It was just incredible. There was a sort of sense that, you know, you’re family. Coming around you when you most needed them. And then what was really nice was when we moved to the rented house, there was a little flurry of activity and people brought bits and pieces and

things to make it home. And then people kind of left us alone to settle down, which I really appreciated. [...] the genuineness of our family here, of how people truly care and show that they care, cos it's one thing, isn't it? to say: "Gosh, I'm so sorry to hear what's happened", but actually to turn up on your doorstep, to phone you up and say: "come and eat with us". To me, it's really putting it into action. And we've received so much of that, it's been incredible. So, yeah, that's been [...] spiritually a very significant event in our lives. I think as a family as well [...] for the children as well. It's been a real lesson for them in, you know, in caring and how we should care for one another" (Lucy, interview).

"my heart is that they might come to know God, they might come to know of the saviour that loves them and [...] through coming to the church, that they might *experience God's love for them* as well as meeting them on a human level, providing somewhere where they can come and feel comfortable and at ease and get to know some other people, some other in the same position as them. [...] *being Christians among them, by welcoming them, by loving them, by listening, by getting to know them, by hearing the needs* that they might have and maybe do something about that, maybe, really making them feel welcome and hopefully having them to *see something of Jesus in us*, [...] that's our prayer" (Celia, interview).

In Celia's extract, we glimpse at the core of authenticity as relational, ethical and self-transcendent. Celia, at the parent and toddler group, meets the parents at a "human level", helping and supporting them in their role of parents, but it is also through that relationship that Celia and the rest of the team live out their faith. Their love for the parents seeks to mirror divine love. The relationship is the vehicle for experiencing the love of God, where the receivers of love are both the parents and Celia. Indeed, the parents may feel the love of God in the love they receive from Celia and the team, whilst Celia transcends herself and experiences the love of God that, in turn, transforms her attitude towards the parents. This is evidenced by her comments after the interview, reported below. The relationship with Jesus has, for Celia, transformed how she experiences the parents she has met at the group.

Celia mentioned that one day she was walking down the street when she saw one of the mums from the parent and toddler group. She felt compassion for that mother and remembered a verse where Jesus feels compassion for people. She felt the same compassion. She cared and she was made to feel that way by God. It isn't just her. That is not what those activities at the church are about. That's not what serving is about. It is not individuals, but God calling you to do it. God calls you to serve and God enables you to feel that care and compassion for people. (Field notes)

This is echoed in Camden's comments.

"It's a matter of being so filled with something that you have to do it. So filled with compassion for homeless people, for instance, that you have to spend time with them and you have to try and help them. It would hurt you not to. That's the kind of, I think, experience that God wants for you [...] God loves each and anyone of us equally. We are all children to him. He loves everyone of us in a deeper way than I love [name of daughter]. I'm never gonna understand that. I don't want to understand that, I just wanna be in awe of that. I wanna say: 'that is amazing'. And just simply to cry and appreciate it and see people through God's eyes. That's something Liberia did for me. I saw Winifred [Camden's wife] through God's eyes when I came back and it brought me to tears. It was just nuts. I have a deep love for Winifred, but I had a new respect for her as my wife, cos she wasn't just my wife or my partner or the biggest love in my life. I didn't have [name of daughter] back then. She wasn't just the biggest love in my life; she was so much more 'cos she was God's child" (Camden, interview).

The feeling of compassion and the ability to love are the result of the process of authenticity. From the perspective of my informants, compassion is the result of 'sanctification' (cf. chapter nine). The believer submits to God and thus draws from God the ability to love or act righteously. God fills the believer with compassion and enables the believer to feel compassion. Camden's experience of authenticity, in Africa, deepens his love for his wife. Camden's love for his wife is thus an instance of self-transcendence. After his experience in Africa, Camden loves differently; he loves with compassion. Compassion

is not solely empathy with the suffering of another, but empathy with shared humanity, as expressed by Camden in the following extract.

“When you see that in the unsavoury in society no one wants to speak to, when you see them as a child of God, it’s heartbreaking for you as an individual. [...] When you meet someone for the first time, in a few seconds you call these assumptions about them without knowing anything about them. The way they walk, the way they talk, whether they have eye contact with you, what you know about them in their job, anything like that. God doesn’t see like that. It’s really, really compelling when you try to see someone through God’s eyes, if you do manage to do that. [...] it’s just nuts” (Camden, interview).

The attitude of compassion reflects the attempt of Christians to be like Jesus and, accordingly, see others like Jesus sees them. The ethic of compassion underpins the practices of informants and the running of the church. As mentioned in chapter eight, the vision of Bethlehem is to be accepting of all. The ethic of compassion impacts on how church activities are conducted and how evangelism is understood. Compassion means seeing “the whole person”, their physical and emotional needs; rather than recipients of evangelism, as expressed by Godwin and Selina.

“God has created us to have a physical body, emotions, psychology, the spiritual and I don’t see that God actually separates any of that. I think he’s interested in the *whole person*. [...] you wanna give the message, but the reality is, what their

needs are in that moment in time are much more crucial [...] You've got somebody and try and share what you believe in, but they are on their knees with hunger, it's not gonna do any, it's not gonna do any good. The whole thing is evangelism, but we endeavour to get to the message of it at some point. Jesus, when he walked the earth, he went out and he, he healed people, he didn't always necessarily saved them for want of a better phrase. *Sometimes just healed people because that's what they needed and then he carried on. So, that's the model: give people what they need*, be willing to share what you believe, but literally it is about giving them what they need".

"... Somebody asked what was evangelism and the definition I give is that it's just being Jesus to people. Ehm, and that's the reason why we do it, is to show love to people, isn't it? And it's to be genuine, because Christianity is not being inward-looking and just thinking of yourself and that's unfortunately how society is turning. [...] So that is all self-serving, isn't it? Because I'm just serving me and that's not what Christianity is, Christianity is about, you know, is not putting yourself first, it's putting our people first. [...] it's about loving people" (Selina, interview).

6. Discussion

The previous sections have provided reflections of participants over action that can be considered authentic. Self-transcendent authenticity captures the actor's awareness of truth. The consciousness of truth calls for conscious action in accordance with that truth. In this case study, participants' self-transcendence refers to the awareness of God and ensuing relationship. Accordingly, self-transcendent authenticity is having a relationship with God, which results in moral development. This is a continuous process requiring continuous effort. One's relationship with God happens through relationships with others and through serving. Serving is moral action. However, its most important aspect, from the participants' point of view, is the attitude of the doer. To be serving, the person needs to be conscious of the action being in service to God.

Actions might be moral, but do not necessarily constitute serving. The actor's frame of mind is essential. Being a Christian is a conscious choice, from which commitment ensues (cf. chapter eight). Christian authenticity rests on one's consciousness of being in a relationship with God and of practising a distinctive way of life. The authenticity of being a Christian lies not in performing moral actions, but in the intent to serve God. The distinctiveness of Christianity lies in the consciousness of the person to follow Jesus by expressing compassion in human relations. One's consciousness of following Jesus is essential for action to constitute serving; however, the boundaries of serving are sometimes disputed. Thus, the case of environmental protection was an example of the

absence of shared norms over what constitutes Christianity. Protection of the environment was considered ethical by all participants, but not sacralised by all. The sacralisation, or attribution of religious significance, to practices and beliefs, legitimises them as part of tradition. It thus defines the boundaries of authenticity.

Individual actors sacralise tradition. Therefore, the individual's personal and social background (cf. chapter six) informs the process of sacralisation. What the believer considers ethical or unethical reflects their personal background, the identity of the group and their interpretation of tradition. The interaction of one's social and personal identity (the 'social I' and the 'individual I') and tradition, as understood individually and communally, defines serving. The difference of opinions over the sacred status of environmental concerns reveals the social dynamics that construct religious tradition. Younger members tended to be more supportive of seeing environmental protection as serving. The topic was not discussed in depth, due to lack of time, and the discussion did not benefit from the relevant literature in eco-theology. So it is difficult to see at this point whether environmental concerns may be inscribed within tradition.

In contrast, Africa represents the experience of authenticity *par excellence*. It shows the transformative effect of serving. One's relationship with Jesus, and thus awareness of the truth, deepens through serving. Africa allows an intense form of self-transcendence, for it is physically the 'other side'. In Christian imaginary, Africa is truer because it lacks the artificiality of Western life. Once again, the anti-materialist motif resurfaces. Western materialism, selfish individualism, and comfort are lived as a challenge to being authentic.

This is understood by participants as a weakness on their part. Africa strips away the mundane from their consciousness, 'denudes' them to be in contact with their true self of being human. Thus, the feeling of compassion is not just 'suffering with', but seeing the "whole person", as Godwin described it, the same way as Jesus did.

Compassion, here, means seeing the other person as human. It entails going beyond the socio-economic status and situation in the life of a person. Just as self-transcendent authenticity is an experience, no matter how fleeting, of going beyond the social and personal construct of the self, the feeling of compassion allows the person to see the human beyond the social construct. This is the experience of informants. It should not be taken normatively, but descriptively. The ethic of compassion seems to have an effect not only on relationships with others, such as Celia's feelings for the parents of the parent and toddler group, but also on personal relationships, as Camden recounts his changed feelings for his wife, following his experience in Africa.

Compassion is expressed in relationships, which are central to Bethlehem's identity. Anecdotal evidence suggests that people who have visited Bethlehem centre consider it welcoming and friendly. The practice of relationships reflects the ethic of compassion embodied by Jesus. The ethical ideal of being like Jesus is articulated as "seeing others as God sees them". Compassion is not limited to feeling empathy for the suffering of others, but it inspires recognition of the dignity of others, regardless of their situation in life. The relational approach of compassion is in contrast with the abstract ethical principles of the ethic of purity. This is exemplified by Godwin's comments, which identify being like Jesus

as helping others by addressing their physical and emotional needs. Communicating the “message” of Christianity, evangelism, is thus secondary to being like Jesus to others.

As I have argued in chapter eight, Bethlehem exemplifies a move from doctrine to authenticity, which mirrors the move from an ‘ethic of purity’ towards an ‘ethic of compassion’. This ‘move’ results from the construction of Christianity in opposition to wider society, seen as lonely and competitive, and in opposition to ‘traditional religion’, seen as norm-oriented. Participants also interpret the Old Testament as based on norms in contrast with the New Testament, which is seen as based on love. The authenticity of Christianity lies in being like Jesus: being compassionate in human relations, as Jesus would. This dichotomy between ‘ethic of compassion’ and ‘ethic of purity’ is a heuristic device to capture the antithesis expressed by participants in constructing the distinctiveness of Christianity. It also highlights the effect of a different ethical approach on boundary-making. Accordingly, Bethlehem’s ‘ethic of compassion’ blurs the boundaries between Christian and non-Christian.

The compassion for humanity as a whole has the effect of stirring believers to be open to the stranger, to identify with one another’s humanity. Authentic ethics is thus an attitude towards others. This should not be understood as a feeling; rather the emotion of compassion is fruit of a conscious decision. It results from the process of identity construction of authenticity that entails self-surrender, and the sacralisation of norms and practices, including the practice of relationships. The ‘ethic of compassion’ may contribute to destabilise ethical norms, such as those surrounding sexuality, and doctrine (cf. chapter

eight). It is worth reiterating that the 'ethic of compassion' should not be understood normatively as superior to that of purity or more progressive. The ethic of purity encapsulates judgement that is essential to concerns over justice. From an *etic* perspective, compassion and purity identify the different approaches in the boundary-making of a group as well as their ethical norms.

7. Conclusions

The chapter delved into the ethical aspects of authentic practices. The example of Jesus is moral, thus being a Christian implies living morally. However, serving is not merely moral, nor is it merely what is deemed normative within one's tradition. Serving is determined by an attitude and thus requires intentionality: action needs to be consciously performed to serve God. Intentionality stresses the choice made by the believer to follow Jesus. It is not mere choice, but consciousness of the religious/spiritual significance of one's actions. Being authentic calls for commitment to practise a distinctive way of life, which is in accordance with the image of Jesus informants hold. Serving, in turn, raises one's awareness of one's relationship with the divine.

Serving is moral, however not all moral concerns are serving. Thus, sacralisation defines the boundaries of what is considered Christian authenticity. The group discussion on environmental concerns showed that the protection of the environment is not framed by all

within a sacred perspective. It is deemed moral, but not sacred. This emphasises the necessity of avoiding conflation of ethics and religion. Authenticity is thus not confined to ethics or, even, truth. The recognition of truth in other traditions, as shown in chapter eight, reveals self-transcendent authenticity as tapping into something that is seen as universally human whilst, at the same time, stressing the privileged position of Christianity in relation to God. In other words, while people belonging to other religions or none might experience self-transcendence and “know something of truth”, Christianity offers the “truer” way, a privileged way to truth.

This understanding of Christianity as a privileged path to truth, or God, is an example of the ‘ethic of purity’, which is based on norms. The emphasis on compassion in the local narrative and practice of relationships seems to suggest a tension between the privileged truth of Christianity and the recognition of others, implied by the ‘ethic of compassion’. The understanding of compassion, presented in this chapter, rests on a shared humanity, shared ethics, and shared truth. Thus, the authenticity of compassion lies in the consciousness of one’s behaviour being part of one’s relationship with Jesus. Being authentic means being a true follower of Jesus, which entails a subjective process of conscious understanding of one’s relation to Jesus and moral development. Authentic Christianity is thus distinctive in its intentionality, or consciousness, of practising the way of Jesus.

Chapter Eleven

Conclusions

1. A Contribution

The aim of this thesis has been to provide a better understanding of individual religious identity for contemporary times that went beyond the sociological construct of religion as a category identifying propositional belief, belonging to and attendance at religious establishments, and adherence to a set of cultural and ethical claims. It has been argued that such categorisation reifies the multifaceted phenomenon of religion and reflects an anachronistic Protestant model of religion, based on transcendence, which paradoxically fails to account for contemporary forms of Protestantism in a pluralistic society. Thus, chapter two has critiqued the notion of the 'disenchantment' of modernity for disregarding historical instances of rationalisation, differentiation, and individualisation and thus constructing a uniform pre-modern 'enchanted' world. The sociology of Georg Simmel provides a more nuanced understanding of the modern individualisation process and the

opportunity to explore how modern heightened subjectivity has shaped contemporary religiosity.

The object of the research was, therefore, to construct concepts that would capture how individual religiosity is expressed today, taking as a case study a group of committed Christian evangelicals. The focus on individual religiosity and the choice of ethnographic methods has enabled an appreciation of the individuals' aspirations and agency in constructing their identity. The dominant theories that have paid attention to the role of the individual – rational choice theory and spirituality studies – have assumed different conceptions of the individual. The former reduces the individual to self-interest, whilst the latter relies on a dichotomy between religion, as oriented towards the transcendent and experienced through official institutions, and spirituality, as oriented towards the immanent inner experience and self-expression. Both accounts neglect the role of commitment in religious life.

The conceptualisation of the individual in rational choice theory and spirituality studies emphasises individual autonomy, which is detached from cultural identity and group dynamics. The schema of the 'I and Thou', in chapter six, addresses this issue by proposing a relational account of the subject. The resulting relational self serves much better the research participants' own conception of the individual as interdependent. Thus, the thesis has made a theoretical contribution by providing a relational understanding of the subject; reconceptualising Simmel's religiosity (*Religiosität*) and belief (*belief in*) to provide a more

nuanced account of the narratives and practices of religious actors; and by formulating a concept of authenticity, which is not exhausted by ethical concerns.

The narratives and practices, emerging from the empirical research, revealed the construction of Christianity through the prism of authenticity, as a distinctive and ‘truer’ way of living. The theme of authenticity echoes transformations in the refashioning of church identity in the US, Australia and New Zealand. Viewed at a purely organisational level, Bethlehem church might seem an exercise in making Christianity relevant to contemporary lives by changing the physical environment of the church and providing services to the local community. However, this reading misunderstands the intentions of its members and leadership as well as their level of engagement with the wider culture. In the midst of pluralistic ‘difference’, this group of evangelicals has embraced the narrative of authenticity, which combines particularity and universality.

Pluralism offers Christian evangelicals the platform to articulate the particularistic tradition of Christianity, whilst retaining a claim to – what they understand to be – universal truth. Authenticity refers to a way of being a Christian, but also to Christian culture in a multicultural society. Christian evangelicals claim to follow a “truer” way of being, which is also distinctive by being in opposition to – what is understood as – mainstream culture. The *emic* notion of authenticity thus encapsulates a moral critique of society, but also religion as a practice sustained by a distinctive mind-set. The empirical chapters have shown that *emic* authenticity shares – what Simmel called – the ‘unselfish surrender’ of religiosity (Simmel 1912/1997, p. 161); yet it is not self-negation or unio

mystica, but affirmation of one's individuality. However, the individual's choice to lead the religious life engenders commitment. The person takes upon herself to live authentically by being true to what she considers truth.

The thesis thus developed the concept of authenticity to better reflect the actors' understanding of religious life. Authenticity, as proposed in this thesis, is a process of identity construction rather than a normative ideal. This enables a processual understanding of the individual and of identity-making. The authentic self is based on Simmel's underdeveloped notion of self-transcendence, which identifies the person's pull beyond her social and personal dimension, a sense of a wider horizon of 'truth'. Truth, here, is what is understood as such by actors within their particularistic cultural tradition. Truth may be felt as universal, however, it is always comprehended, experienced, and articulated through the framework of one's tradition.

This perspective stresses the agency of the actor in interpreting tradition to make sense of their search for self-transcendence. By identifying Simmel's notion of religiosity (*Religiosität*) with a sensitivity to self-transcendence, I linked the authentic self, and the concept of authenticity, with living the 'religious life'. Religiosity is thus not belief or belonging to a religious tradition or, even, religious manifestation, as argued by Simmel. Following Simmel, self-transcendence is not limited to religious life, but is present in other endeavours. The religious (self-transcendent) attitude thus includes spiritual practices, but it may also refer to political or artistic endeavours. It is, on one hand, a broad notion that applies across different fields, and yet, on the other hand, it captures a specific way of

being, which is present in different degrees depending on the person. Authenticity is thus a process of identity formation through the search for truth. Truth, within the theoretical framework, is social, reflecting one's social background and relationships; individual, striking a chord with the person; and self-transcendent, tapping into the universal.

It has been shown that, although expressed mostly in moral behaviour, *emic* authenticity does not identify an ethical ideal, but an attitude born out of one's relationship with Jesus. The boundaries of authenticity are thus not simply ethical, but are in relation to one's tradition. The individual religious actor participates in the formation of tradition by sacralising narratives and practices. The theoretical concept of sacralisation identifies the process of identification of the person with her religious tradition, interpretation and attribution of value to it. This process is essential in constituting the sacred, as the example of environmental concerns, in chapter ten, has demonstrated. Sacralisation also illustrates how the adherence to religious tradition stems from the person understanding herself as religious and leading a religious life. The intensity of the process of 'sacralisation' reflects one's religiosity, which, as conceived by Simmel, is present in people in varying degrees. Therefore, not all in one's life is seen within the religious framework and not all that is seen within the framework of faith is sacralised in the same way by people of the same group.

Through sacralisation one sees oneself within a religious framework and, as a consequence, invests with sacred value and legitimacy one's tradition and lived religion. The boundaries of authenticity are, therefore, constantly constructed by individuals and the group. Nevertheless, the empirical research has shown that the distinctive attitude of being an

authentic Christian is characterised by intentional commitment and compassion. The 'ethic of compassion' is the overarching ethic, but also the narrative that constructs the identity of Bethlehem church, as a "real" and "caring" church, and of individual Christians. The authentic identity of Bethlehem Christians is expressed primarily as the ethic and practice of compassion. In turn, the narrative and practice of compassion are articulated dialectically in contraposition to – what is seen as – the materialistic and lonely world outside, and the stern and judgemental "traditional" church. Christians at Bethlehem do not claim that informality and community-focussed church-doing represent 'true' Christianity, but a better way to communicate Christianity in the contemporary pluralistic world.

Compassion is interpreted as 'truer' and, thus, identifies a better way to walk on the path of authenticity. Authenticity is thus expressed through compassion. The practice of compassion has engendered an open attitude towards others in the local community thus blurring boundaries. The relationship with the 'outside' is, hence, two-fold: of opposition and criticism towards contemporary profit-making and selfish culture, but also of openness towards people looking for a community. This has been translated in activities that are of service to the local community without asking for any religious commitment or attendance, with the intent to provide a 'safe haven' from society. It has also posed a challenge in terms of the understanding of exclusive salvation, which for some has meant rethinking salvation altogether. The 'ethic of compassion' is pervasive of the local practices. It is from the narratives and practices of Christians, individually and communally, that the sacred emerges. The sacred is thus not the 'holy' (Otto 1917/1924), or what is considered ethical

in a given society at a given time (Lynch 2012); rather it constitutes the boundaries of authenticity.

The thesis thus makes a theoretical contribution by interpreting Simmelian sociology and philosophy and developing a theoretical framework for the understanding of individual religious identity in contemporary pluralistic society. Focussing on individual religiosity, it proposes its re-conceptualisation in the light of the 'search for authenticity', which emerged from the fieldwork. The thesis formulates the concept of authenticity, with its boundary-making process (sacralisation), for the study of contemporary evangelical Christianity. It thus integrates conceptual reflection and construction with ethnographic research bridging the gap between theory and empirical scholarship. Authenticity provides a frame for the understanding of how Christian religiosity is lived out in today's diverse society.

The concepts of compassion and purity begin to challenge the adversarial framing of ethical debates, which leads too often to an incommensurable divide between progressive and conservative positions. This fails to capture the internal logic and motivations of religious groups, and thus perpetuates antagonism rather than dialogue. A more nuanced portrayal of religious identity and practices, may help shift the focus onto possible paths of mutual understanding and cooperation. Drawing on Simmel's reflections on honour, the thesis has linked ethical practices and ideas to boundary-making and thus offered a broader perspective on the social dimension of ethics. Further research is needed to develop a robust framework for the understanding of ethical reasoning and practices within religious and non-religious communities. In particular, research should investigate what type of

ethical norms dominates in religious groups, how religious people draw ethical boundaries and identity boundaries, and how they negotiate different ethical ideals in practice. This issue is significant for policy-makers as well as academic scholars, given the current political polarisation in the public sphere. It has also the potential to illumine group dynamics in terms of cohesion and community engagement.

2. Becoming a Sociologist

When I began the study, during my M.Sc. in Social Science Research Methods, my focus was on learning how and why religious groups spend human and material resources to provide services for the community, to make a positive contribution to society, and, possibly, to change society for the better. I remember walking into Huw's office, at the end of my master's fieldwork, and saying "they are really caring". That's it. That was my 'finding': my research participants aimed to be caring and they were. I thought the Ph.D. would expand my knowledge of what made them care for each other and for people in the local community by investigating the role of leadership, the vision of the organisation, the internal structures, and narratives. 'Narratives' is what led me astray. They could not be labelled 'motivation', 'legitimation' of the internal order and philosophy of the group, or 'identity marker', alongside the other reifying categories of gender, class, and ethnicity much loved by sociologists. The sociological category of religion itself did not seem to fit and my informants did not want to identify with it.

I listened to participants, which I could have done better had I had a theory already in place and specific research questions; and without having ditched one theoretical concept after another. I thus began my descent into the Simmelian maelstrom without any theoretical anchor that might have kept me from drowning. The first draft of the 'I and Thou', right from the abyss of Simmel's *Wechselwirkung*, capsized Huw's boat as well, who swam quickly ashore, away from it. My only life-support were a few articles by Simmelian scholar Frédérick Vandenberghe. I once resolved to contact world-renown expert of Simmel, Professor David Frisby, for advice, but he died a week later. I put off contacting Dr Vandenberghe, just in case. So I lost sight of the scope of the research and how it should have been done. I carried on attending the home group and interviewed a few informants, following specific events in the field. As the 'I and Thou' and authenticity were taking shape, I interviewed Arthur and Camden. I wish I could have interviewed more people; I wish I could have interviewed them for longer; and I wish I could have asked them about compassion. Yet, the best data have come from informants opening up and revealing themselves and their lives as part of a conversation, rather than in response to specific questions.

They talked and with their words they made sense of life and gave meaning to it. The truth of which they spoke started to sound like the 'true self' of the prominent witch Starhawk²⁰ (1979). The traditional picture of Christian evangelicals as biblical literalists, staunch believers and utopian builders gave way to the complexity of people getting to grips with the sense of 'something bigger' than mundane chores or selfish pursuits. The community

²⁰ I am grateful to Dr Sara Delamont for introducing me to Starhawk's writings.

they sought to build reminded me of the ideal often talked about in Jewish circles. Therefore, I gave a workshop on community and faith at LimmudFest, a festival-conference of Jewish culture. I asked participants what they did not like of faith communities and what they should be like. I wrote the answers on a board and, then, I presented my findings on Bethlehem church by circling the words on the board. “They are Jews”, someone exclaimed.

I might have turned Christian evangelicals into Jews because my eyes and ears saw and heard the human, rather than the numinous, but they sounded ‘Jewish’. The belief in the inherent relationality of human beings articulated through community building rather than saving souls is, after all, overwhelmingly present in Jewish narratives. Indeed they are better at being Jewish. At the beginning of my Ph.D., while dining in the Rabbi’s *sukkah*, I mentioned I studied a Christian evangelical church. A woman said to me: ‘I know a good one: Bethlehem church’. I said nothing. She asked: ‘why can’t we be like them?’. Bethlehem Christians have made a conscious choice of building – what they call – a spiritual home. It is a home that requires commitment, but seeks to give acceptance and compassion. It is far from perfect and they are always questioning whether they are doing the right thing, or, as put by a church member during a discussion on vision: “people, do we like them?”

I began with an interest in the human and dispensed with God rather quickly. I could thus be faulted for not ‘listening to the Spirit’; yet, for my research participants, rather than in a mystical quest, faith is lived in relationships, in everyday acts of kindness, in feelings of compassion, and in the struggle to overcome the temptation to be selfish, indifferent, and judgemental. I let them speak as much as possible through a perhaps intricate theoretical

framework. The theoretical framework helped me to discern the different aspects of the search for authenticity: the continuous work to be like Jesus. It separated the social from the personal, but also the normative. This distance helped me to see the process of sociation and how that impacts on the formation of ethics.

The concept of authenticity allowed me to capture the interplay between choice and commitment. Having choice implies a conscious decision, which requires commitment. Amidst diversity, choosing an identity means drawing boundaries. Bethlehem Christians have no evident rituals, look, or customs that would differentiate them from their neighbours. Thus, authenticity is an internal characteristic, an attitude, which is expressed in compassionate practices. My informants recognise that others engage in similar action, thus the framework of tradition makes Christian compassion distinctive and provides an identity to the individual. Yet, the theoretical framework distinguishing between the 'ethic of purity' and 'ethic of compassion' sought to capture the tension with which religious and non-religious people struggle in their daily lives.

The distinction derives from an attempt to inscribe the normative within sociological knowledge. Purity and compassion are, therefore, broad and nuanced concepts, because they need to contain boundary-making and boundary-breaking, relationality and individuality, ethical aspirations and concrete situations. Gaining a sociological perspective helped me see the video on pro-life campaigners in a different light, as the inherent tension between moral judgement and love of others, and how these emotions and ideals shape group and individual identities. In turn, a sociological perspective helped me appreciate

that ethics is a practice to which many factors contribute, such as habit, character, upbringing, social pressures, and beliefs. The sociological mind-set I have developed was useful in seeing the 'social' in life; yet, did that turn me into a heathen sociologist?

3. Pilgrimages

At night, sitting next to strangers, I waited to embark on a flight to Israel. It was 2012 and I had never been to Israel before. I kept on postponing, partly because all my holidays were spent at home in Italy seeing my family, after I left them 16 years ago. I hate flying and kept it to the absolutely necessary London – Bologna journey. Why on earth was I going to the Middle East? It was a pilgrimage, of sorts. I decided to see some friends and took the opportunity to present at a conference on spirituality. I slept in hotels and in the safety rooms in my friends' house. I stayed within the greenline and beyond it, with religious and with secular Israelis. I wandered in the streets of the old city of Jerusalem with a long skirt and scarf over my head. It was March and it was freezing. I noticed people reacting differently depending on what I was wearing. I disliked the 'inauthenticity' of the old city, with its fake show for tourists, and the tourists, with their photographs of walls, people and spices. I took copious sociological notes and wondered whether I had already become a heathen sociologist.

I had swapped my room with a perfect view of the golden dome of Al Aqsa for one with better wifi. I refused to queue to get a glimpse of the dome, I toured grudgingly the internal

part of the Kotel, and uttered a perfunctory prayer outside. A friend told me that had I stayed at friends, away from the old city, had Shabbat together, it would have felt very different. As I passed the long queue of tourists waiting to enter Al Aqsa, I asked myself for what I would queue. “The Sistine chapel”, came the answer straightaway. Notwithstanding the many documentaries and photographs, that ceiling was like an arrow going right through. I realised that my ‘religiosity’ needed an artistic expression, that only in Michelangelo’s paintbrush could I glimpse at the transcendent. What captures my imagination is the artist’s attempt at transforming everyday objects and images into symbols of the infinite, thus making me more sensitive to the unfolding relationship between transcendent and immanent.

Being Kantian, however, means aesthetic appreciation serves but to bring comfort to the daily struggle of fulfilling one’s ethical duty in life. After all, this project sprang from the dissatisfaction at political and ethical debates, where conservative narratives seem to hold the monopoly of morality, but also at the alleged authenticity and legitimacy of ‘orthodox’ and conservative forms of religion. The focus on individuals of this research was, partly, an attempt at examining how they shape religion to include their understanding of authenticity, and how they legitimise change with themselves and others. What could not be part of the thesis is a discussion of power, which would have required a theory of power and, possibly, a wider investigation of the relationships between different religious institutions and actors and their production of legitimising discourses. I wanted to understand the role of individuals and their ability to ‘own’ the sacred. That led me into the discovery of how human beings create meaning and value in their lives. What I have

learned above everything else is that, besides our ethical or religious normative callings, there is a richness in social life that is worth exploring. Sociology is a window on the beauty of the human.

Appendix A – Statement of Faith

1. God

There is one God, who exists eternally in three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God is perfect and unchanging in His character. He is the Almighty Creator, Saviour and Judge who controls everything for His own glory. God is love, and has demonstrated that love supremely in sending His Son into the world.

2. The Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ

The Lord Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, and lived a sinless life in obedience to God the Father. He taught with authority and all His words are true. He died on a cross in our place, bearing God's punishment for our sin, redeeming us by His blood. He rose from the dead and, in His resurrection body, went into heaven, where He now intercedes for us and is exalted as Lord of all.

3. The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is fully God. He brings glory to the Lord Jesus Christ, convinces people of their wrongdoing, and by living in Christians He empowers them to become more like the Lord Jesus.

4. The Bible

God has revealed Himself in the Bible, which consists of the Old and New Testaments alone. Every word of the Bible, as originally given, has been spoken by God. It is, therefore, without error, fully reliable, and the supreme and final authority in faith and life. It shows us the way to God.

5. The Human Race

Everyone is made in the image of God, and therefore has equal dignity and worth. Our greatest purpose is to obey, worship and love God. However, as a result of disobedience by the parents of the human race, every aspect of human nature has been corrupted. Everyone is therefore without spiritual life, a sinner by nature and by choice, and faces the Judgement of God who is holy.

6. Salvation

Salvation cannot be earned or deserved: it is the free gift of God. He made it available through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must turn from our sin and trust in Jesus Christ in order to receive the benefits of salvation. These include forgiveness, being credited with the righteousness of Christ, a restored relationship with God, the gift of the Holy Spirit, adoption into God's family, and eternal life.

7. Church

The church is the company of people who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. It exists to reveal the glory of God. The church draws its life and direction from the Lord Jesus Christ. It is therefore an organism and not just an organization. Churches form locally as believers meet together to worship God, to encourage one another in their spiritual lives, and to serve their community. Obedience to the Word of God requires us to preach, evangelise, baptise, celebrate communion, and pray for all. All members of the church are equal and should use their varied gifts to work together in love and unity.

8. The Future

The Lord Jesus will come a second time. The dead will be raised. Believers in the Lord Jesus will enter into everlasting joy in fellowship with God. All unbelievers, whether living or dead, will be judged and suffer eternal punishment. God will make all things new and be glorified forever.

Appendix B – Vision of the Church

Mission Statement

Attracting the world to Jesus Christ through our everyday witness, discipling one another and those we invite to Him.

Vision Statement

Building an alternative community of Jesus' disciples, working together to make our witness accessible and visible to all.

Value 1 – Our God

Our God is Father, Son and Spirit loving one another, and we are His people who delight in Him. He is our Father, because we are united with His Son, Jesus, and empowered with His Holy Spirit. We trust Him to lead and guide us in everyday life, through His word by the Spirit.

Value 2 – Worship

Our God is awesome. There is none like Him. He has reached out to us when we deserved nothing and lavished upon us His very best. Our response is joyful worship and careful obedience to such a wonderful God. We gather together to worship him in small and large groups with a variety of styles, also recognising that our whole lives are worship to our glorious God.

Value 3 – Being Community

Our God is a community of diverse persons who has drawn us together into community by and for the love of Jesus. We are from a mix of backgrounds with diverse gifts, characters, past histories and families, yet we are one family, one body with Christ as our head, loving one another and letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.

Value 4 – Engaging Community

We are a community which does its best to present Jesus to the watching world, inviting others to taste and see not only the God who walks among us, but also to experience for themselves the outworking of Jesus' life and love in our lives.

Value 5 – Welcome

We are a people who aim to meet everyone where they are, being accepting of the situation in which they find themselves as they come to be part of the church. While God loves people just the way they are, He loves them too much to leave them that way, and our hope is for transformation for all into the likeness of and obedience to Christ.

Value 6 – Work in Progress

We are a people who acknowledge that we are not the finished article. We will remain humble, realising that in both success and defeat God is working through us for our good and always questioning how and why we are doing what we are doing.

Value 7 – Discipling

We are a people who are always building one another up in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. We know that trusting Jesus affects our obedience to Him in every area of life, and we will encourage and rebuke each other in love so that we might grow more into His likeness.

Value 8 – Prayer

We are a people who rejoice in fellowship with our God and love to talk to Him and listen to Him as an expression of our Sonship. We will cultivate this in big and small gatherings and will endeavour to make it a normal part of our Christian friendships and when we are on our own.

Value 9 – Creativity

We are a creative church expressing God's creativity among us and giving freedom to the creative gifts He has given us, stirring up interest through attractive ways of inviting people to Jesus. As creative people, our church structures will only ever serve our need but never govern us, refusing to let tradition set in.

Value 10 – The World

We are a community who recognise the needs of the world beyond ourselves. We will listen to, pray for and engage with God's mission in the whole world.

Appendix C – Membership

To become a member of Bethlehem Church, we ask that the following statement be confirmed:

In becoming a member of Bethlehem Church, I do so expressing my belief in the Almighty and Eternal God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I affirm my faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Saviour. I accept the Word of God as my rule in all matters of faith and conduct.

With God's help, I will seek to be a loving, faithful member of Bethlehem Church, making it a priority to read the Bible, pray, give of my talents and money, and be present at the Church meetings for teaching, fellowship, worship and prayer.

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