

IS DURKHEIM'S "SOCIOLOGISM" OUTDATED? DEBATING "INDIVIDUALISM" IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

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Abstract. This paper critically examines and rejects arguments made by contemporary sociologists in France about the appropriateness of Durkheim's sociology in general, and his sociology of religion in particular. A century after the publication of *The Elementary Forms*, social scientists, especially in Europe, contend that "individualized" spiritualities are the definitive feature of contemporary forms of modern, globalised religion and infer from this empirical evidence that Durkheim's "sociologism" is outdated. However, contemporary evidence indicates that *collective* religious expressions are colonizing the public spaces from whence they ostensibly had been withdrawn. Individualization, per se, is not only a contested concept but also a normative discursive technique of rationalization by which the great religions and new religious movements adjust to the "individualistic" values of modernity in global settings. This paper addresses the question of whether Durkheim really was wrong about the collective, yet complex nature and future of religion.

Keywords : Durkheim, sociology, religion, France, individualism

Résumé. Cet article discute la manière dont on estime en France que la sociologie de Durkheim en général, et sa sociologie des religions en particulier, n'est plus pertinente actuellement. Un siècle après la publication des *Formes Élémentaires*... les spécialistes du religieux, en particulier en Europe, affirment que les « spiritualités individualisées » seraient l'ultime trait d'une religion moderne et mondialisée, un constat à partir duquel on infère l'obsolescence du « sociologisme » durkheimien. Les preuves de la colonisation des espaces publics par des expressions religieuses collectives abondent pourtant, et l'individualisation, un concept contesté, est aussi une *technique discursive et normative de rationalisation par laquelle les grandes religions comme les nouveaux mouvements religieux s'ajustent aux valeurs « individualistes » de la modernité dans le contexte mondial.* On peut alors se demander si Durkheim s'est vraiment trompé à propos de la nature collective mais complexe de la religion, et de son futur.

Mots clés: Durkheim, sociologie, religion, France, individualisme

INTRODUCTION

In Northern and Southern Europe, North and South America, but also beyond the boundaries of the western world, the attention of contemporary sociologists has been captured by the emergence of “individualized” religious practices and beliefs. This feature of modernity, conceptualized in terms of “individualization”, and understood in light of a certain kind of individualism, has been widely discussed over the past century. Individualization, it is argued, has, ostensibly, contributed significantly to the transformation of societies, cultures, as well as religious beliefs, conduct, feelings and organizations. Contemporary sociologists in France (and elsewhere) have coalesced around this model, attempting to demonstrate on an empirical basis that religion has undergone such profound changes and that “classical” theoretical models used in the sociology of religion no longer correspond to contemporary realities. It is argued that the sociology of religion needs to be reinvented, and pioneering work in the discipline, particularly those of Emile Durkheim, should be relegated to the history of ideas. The emergence of new concepts, methods and perspectives has come with the expectation of furthering this analytical abandonment of anachronistic “classical” social theorists, encouraging the acceptance of purportedly more “relevant” and innovative approaches. The current argument in favour of this modernizing shift in sociology is that the present and future of religion cannot be understood with the now *passé* methodological and conceptual tools used to study religions of the past. However, I argue that the repeated criticism of the alleged neglect of individualism in Durkheim’s sociology (which apparently makes it an impediment to grasping contemporary religious life), conceals another reality, namely the appropriation of the culture of individualism as a social fact by contemporary religions.

Over the past two decades in French sociology of religion, Durkheim’s works, once considered “crucial,” have been subjected to considerable criticism, more so than those of Max Weber, which appear to be more in vogue (Willaime 1995). French sociology was born and institutionalized under Durkheim’s influence. Pierre Bourdieu is arguably among the last sociologists to be committed to Durkheim’s legacy. In France, Durkheim’s theoretical legacy is typically seen as rooted in his theory of religion. Prominent French religion scholars, like Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Marcel Gauchet, or Jean-Paul Willaime all agree that Durkheim’s sociology is ill-suited to the study of religion in modern society, especially because it supposedly ignores the rise of modern individualism and its wide societal acceptance. Social scientists studying religion have developed this emphasis on individualization in three different ways.

First, individualization and individualism are still considered to be unquestioned empirical historical fact. Second, in terms of a broader theory of social change, the cultural history of individualization is considered to be the main feature in the emergence of "modernity." Third, following from the other two points, predominant contemporary French social scientists contend that the conceptual matrices of the pioneering theories of the "founders" of the discipline, should be rethought and reframed.

The charge against the obsolescence of "classical" sociologies, among them Durkheim's theory of "religion-as-society", explicated in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (hereafter, EFRL), is somewhat specious. First, the concept of "individualism" itself is a multifaceted one and its nuances have been neglected. Second, there is a noticeable partial understanding of Durkheim's approach to individualism. My contention here is that a serious consideration of Durkheim's sociology of religion, in *The Forms* and in other works, offers an interesting vantage point for understanding the contemporary debate over "sociologism" and "individualism" in modern French sociology.

This paper, therefore, offers a critical review of some of the most influential criticisms of Durkheim's theory of religion in France. In doing so, I delineate various conceptions of "individualism" that have been developed since Durkheim, not least in opposition to it. Emphasis is placed on interpretations of Durkheim's approach to individualism by post-Durkheimian scholars. I then engage in a discussion of the relevance of the cultural and economic models of religious individualism developed by critics of the Durkheimian approach to religion. Finally, by way of a perhaps unconventional conclusion, I suggest that the issue of the appropriateness of using Durkheim's sociology in contemporary, modernist, individually-oriented theories of religion might be resolved by taking a turn toward pragmatics.

SOCIOLOGY, MODERNITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

After emphasizing "systems" over the last two decades, sociology in France has witnessed a "return of the individual" to the forefront of social and religious studies (Touraine 1992). This has happened somewhat paradoxically in the context of a renewal of sociology in general (Bajoit 2008). This recent emphasis on the individual in the social sciences has even generated the development of the "sociology of the individual" (Kaufman 2001). In this view, the "individual" is understood to be an autonomous actor with agency, which while emergent in modernity, now comes to assume different forms. One form is the figure of the anomic,

isolated individual lost in the emptiness of hypermodernity, a kind of Durkheimian creature affected by the dissolving forces of modernity. A second figure is that of the self-actualizing person who, through inter-relations with others, has achieved an ideal of freedom, having made a break from the alienating weight of tradition. These two models stand at opposite poles of the sociological representations of individualism in the West, yet both refer to modernity.

For the vast majority of contemporary French sociologists, it is because of recent social changes that sociology has had to come to grips with the individual (Martucelli & Singly 2009). As Danilo Martucelli argues, given that from its beginnings sociology sought to understand modernity, it understandably focused on modern expressions of human life, and logically enough, the individualization process was deemed to be central to it. In short, sociology is taken to be the sociology of modernity and the sociology of modernity must then, also, be the sociology of the individual, as if there was no way of thinking of “the modern” other than in individualistic terms (Martucelli 2002).

Given these assumptions, it is no surprise that modernization processes in the religious sphere are conceptualized both in terms of the secularization of ideas and beliefs, and the individualization of practices. In the 1990s, prominent sociologists like Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1993) and Jean-Paul Willaime (1995) have been instrumental in framing sociological theories of religion in such terms. They have developed a model of modern individualism free of the psychological meaning of the term (i.e., personality development via cultural integration), instead defining it in a sociological way by stressing a relocation of *collective* values and beliefs in the individual as a *subjective* entity. The alleged shift from the collective to the individual in sociology, and even more prominently within the sociology of religion, also involves the shift “from popular to institutional and from institutional to personal” religious experience (Pace & Acquaviva 1994: 13). This individualistic turn in religiosity, understood as evidence of the rise of a modern “spirituality” over against “traditional” religion, epitomizes a new “axial age” in the global history of religions (Lambert 2000).

The process of individualization suggests that the individual — in contrast to the holistic worldviews and community-oriented norms that supposedly ruled so-called “traditional societies” — has become the main *topos* and *locus* of social, cultural and religious life in modernity. Modern societies are individualistic since the individual is the new cultural “hero” with which modern people identify (Martucelli 1999). According to this prominent line of analysis by which sociology itself has defined its objects and methods according to a “Great Divide,” “trad-

itional” societies studied by anthropology are classified as being “collective” by nature. In traditional societies the individual does not exist *per se* but is supposedly the reflection of the social forces s/he is shaped by. In France, a tradition of anthropological thinking, rooted in Levy-Bruhl’s work from the 1930s paralleled in the English-speaking national traditions (such as found in Robert Lowie and Paul Radin) and more recently, in the 1980s, depicts “traditional” societies as ones in which individualism had little chance, if any, to emerge and develop. When individualism is found to exist, it is seen as only a contingent, pathological and unexpected marginal behaviour (Servier 1980) or at the very least, the derivative influence of western cultural models on non-western ones (Marie 1997). Anthropological conceptions of traditional societies resonate with the dichotomy of “mechanical” versus “organic” solidarity coined by Durkheim in a non-religious context, namely in *De la division du travail social* (*The Division of Labour in Society* (2007 [1893])).

Until the 1970s and 1980s, theoretical models of religious change mainly discussed the shift from *religious* traditional epochs or non-western societies to *secular* epochs or modern-western, allegedly “disenchanted,” ones. The persistence of religious beliefs and practices in the life of modern societies brought about the revision of “classical” models of religious change and the formulation of alternative theories (Hervieu-Léger 1993), considering that these “modern” expressions of religiosity were *necessarily different* from previous traditional ones — different in content, as a mixed systems of beliefs, borrowing from ancient traditions as well as modern movements; and different in forms, as more “subjective” or “intimate”, i.e., individualistic, experiences. The focus on “individualism” fundamentally traces an empirical and a theoretical boundary between “traditional” and “modern” religiosity.

This is one of the main factors explaining the reinvention of sociological terminology and attempts to substitute the model of “spirituality” (individually-based and less-deterministic systems of beliefs than “officially” religious ones) for “religion.” If the individual is a cultural product, individualization is the sociological process by which it came to be realized in history.

Individualization processes in the religious sphere have produced different effects, but the social sciences have been more interested in the rise of “personally”-centered modes of religiosity aligned with ideals of modernity, and in the erosion of traditional forms of religion deemed to be “collective” in form and nature. In the 1980s and 1990s, the gradual but obvious alteration of traditional community-based religious traditions led some scholars to hypothesize the dissolution of society itself and predict a future anomic world. Yves Barel, an economist, suggested

for instance that we live in a “society of emptiness” (1984). The anthropologist Georges Balandier maintained, a few years before Zygmunt Bauman popularized the term, that modern society generates a “liquefaction” of its cultural forms (Balandier 1985). Yet Balandier himself concedes that religion was more resistant than any other social institution to rapid changes driven by modernization processes. In his view, the social sciences, especially sociology, are not prepared to study the dynamics of modernity: the wide-scale quantitative analyses typically relied upon for the study of predictable social tendencies, was no longer suitable in an unpredictable world in flux. Thus, small-scale qualitative approaches deemed a more relevant tool for inquiry into unexpected social and cultural innovations (Balandier 1985). Balandier explicitly suggested that the approach and methods of “classical” Durkheimian sociology (concomitant variations recorded in large social cohorts) were obsolete in modern times and that sociologists needed to invent new conceptual and methodological tools for the study of individuals in their local context.

THE END OF SOCIOLOGY OR, OF *DURKHEIMIAN* SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION?

As Daniele Hervieu-Léger pointed out, and her works had a noteworthy influence on modernist theories of religion, the process of individualization is concomitant with a new personally oriented *bricolage* or mixing of religious beliefs, practices and symbols (1993). Individualization has also led to a fragmentation of the religious landscape into “bits” or “crumbs” (...“*en miettes*”) according to her 2001 volume. French sociology of religion thus contends that the religious landscape of modern societies is a mosaic of beliefs, practices, groups and traditions, rather than the superposition of a unified religious system, and that pluralism not only changed the face of religion, but also the face of the social sciences of religion.

Among the scholars who have embarked on the renewal of the sciences of religion, Hervieu-Léger, again, has continuously pondered the “disintegrating” effects of modernity on religion and consequently, the future of the sociology of religion. Indeed, with the rapid development of individualistic behaviours, the sociology of religion is threatened by the fact that its own object, “religion”, characterized since Durkheim as a “social fact”, is likely to be empirically and theoretically dissolved (Hervieu-Léger 1993). Hervieu-Léger therefore advocated for a new paradigmatic orientation in French sociology of religion, based more on a theory of the individual actor and logics of change in the religious field. In doing so, she urged sociologists to start from this modernist-individ-

ualistic standpoint (Hervieu-Léger 1993). She has had a significant influence over the past two last decades' worth of the sociology of religion (see the recent volume by Bobineau & Tank-Storper 2007).

For Hervieu-Léger, both Durkheim's "religion-as-social-thing" (Durkheim 1912) and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "religious field" (1971), have been displaced by the individualistic tendencies quantitatively and qualitatively recorded in the late twentieth century. Both models are deemed inappropriate for the understanding of modern forms of religiosity (Hervieu-Léger 1993; 2001). Erwan Diantell, a supporter of Hervieu-Léger's positions, argues that Durkheim's (and Bourdieu's) theory of religion had been defined in a deterministic sociological framework influential in the twentieth century. However, the individualistic religious expressions of the twenty-first century cannot be adequately understood if sociologists rely on previous models given their dependence on holism (Diantell 2002). French sociology of religion had thus, under the modernist influence in the 1990s, adopted a new methodological departure point: the "individual."

But to what extent do these "individualistic" perspectives really mean the end of Durkheimian sociology of religion? In his 1927 work, *Le progrès de la conscience dans la philosophie occidentale*, prominent idealist French philosopher Léon Brunschvicg, coined the term *sociologism* to criticize what he considered to be a "sociological dogmatism." In his view, Durkheim was responsible for framing a totalitarian and deterministic conception of human life that left little room for individual freedom and will. If French sociology has long been torn — as have English-speaking sociologies — between individual and collective and idealistic and materialistic visions of society (Bourdieu 1980), French sociologists have devoted extensive efforts to building a sociology beyond the "dead end of sociologism" (Bourricaud 1975). But Durkheim considered the object of sociology to be a *social* one (as he recalled in *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, 1894), social in origins, forms and effects (Desroche 1968) and religion did not escape the rule: "Religion is eminently social", he maintains in *Les Formes* (1986: 13).

Durkheim could easily, and understandably, be accused of promoting sociologism. Some of Durkheim's heirs have nevertheless opposed this simplistic reductionism. Individualization and individualism are complex and multifaceted phenomena. A few references inspired by the assault against Durkheim will illustrate the stakes. In the early 1990s, Alain Touraine underscored the risk of confusing several concepts and models in sociology: the *actor*, the *subject*, the *person* and the *individual* (Touraine 1992). Touraine insisted on the fact that *individualism* must be clearly associated with the rise of a socially autonomous (but not anom-

ic) personal entity, a formulation incompatible with the implied ontological references of the other concepts mentioned. As for Jean Ziegler, he demonstrated that a process of the “individualization of myths” exists in “traditional” societies, even if these remain framed by the normative limits of society in which the “individual” is embedded. In other words, the individualization of symbolic forms must be thought about in a manner different from those associated with individualization of social forms (Ziegler 1969: 180).

Raymond Boudon, one of the most prominent French sociologists of the 1970s and 1980s, founded a “methodological individualism,” rather distinct from the cultural phenomenon of individualization (Boudon & Bourricaud 1982). Moreover, the representation of Durkheim’s sociology as utterly “holistic” and deterministic, articulates a caricature of Durkheim recalling debates occurring during the foundational moments in the discipline (Filloux 1990). More directly addressing the issue of the relevance of Durkheim’s analysis of religion in modernity, Henri Desroche lucidly put the question of the alleged impact of individualism on religion in the Durkheimian perspective thus: “How [must] the diagnosis be labeled,” he asks, “in terms of a society that ceases to be religious or a religion that ceases to be social?” (Desroche 1968: 45). These few examples, chosen among many others, exemplify the tenor of debate about individualism in French sociology, especially in the sociology of religion. They suggest that a careful critical inspection of the origins, forms and effects of what is called “individualization,” is now required.

A SECOND SOURCE OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM: THE ECONOMICS OF RELIGION

Sociology and the history of modernity and modernization are not the only intellectual sources of this “individualistic” turn in religious studies. Despite harsh criticisms leveled by Durkheim himself, since the late nineteenth century, economics has also privileged individually centered models of religious behaviour. The field of the “economics of religion” arose in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s after the pioneering works of economist and sociologist Lawrence Iannaccone. Since then, it has gained widespread influence in religious studies (Obadia and Wood 2011). In the early 1990s, Stephen Warner contended that American economic models of religious behaviour were about to replace old-fashioned theories of secularism and modernization, the models of religious change as framed in Europe (Warner 1993).

Warner's speculation about the substitution of theoretical models has not been entirely confirmed for the United States or elsewhere. Rather, the two paradigms have merged and modernization theories now include the figure of the "consumer" as the new protagonist of religion and belief in hypermodernity. In the 1980s, despite little connection between American-styled "economics of religion" and European-fashioned "modernization" approaches, French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky argued that religion had turned into a "good" that "consumers" could "choose" in a "spiritual supermarket" (1983). In his view, these economic references are not only metaphors: contemporary individualistic attitudes align with a modern "consumer culture." More importantly, the model of *homo economicus*, nowadays an inspiring one for religious studies, refers to an individually-based pattern of behaviour. Thus, when economics infuses religious studies, the result is yet further theoretical promotion of the (abstracted) individual as the basic unit of analysis.

In France, Danièle Hervieu-Léger was instrumental in framing the "market" theory in sociological terms and delineating the contours of individually-oriented choices and the logics of *bricolage* (Hervieu-Léger 1993). The economic model has gained so much influence that Christian sociologist Jean-Louis Schlegel coined the expression "religion à la carte", depicting religious traditions as a "menu" of "meals" that "clients" can select and "consume" (Schlegel 1995). Yet, one wonders to what extent the use of economic metaphors and models corresponds to a real cultural shift from *believers* to *shoppers* in the religious sphere or whether is this just a new perspective inspired by Max Weber's attempt to conceptualise the historical dynamics of religious organisations in economic terms ("entrepreneurship", "market", and so on), at the risk of mistaking "economy" and "economics" in the study of religious change (Robertson 1992). In both cases of modernization theory and economic approaches to religion, the "individual" as *actor*, *model* and *site* for the understanding of religious behaviour, comes to the forefront of contemporary approaches to, and understandings of, social sciences of religion. This resurgence of individualism compromises the long-lasting influence of Durkheim and the richness of his sociological understanding of individualism (including the multiple causes of its emergence), which is still accused of "sociologism" or "anti-individualism."

REVISING DURKHEIM'S SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION?

Was Durkheim so wrong about the study of modern forms of believing and the future of religion in modern societies? After all, Durkheim's

sociological principles draw attention to the relationships between the sociology of religion and general sociology, something unfortunately weakened by the development of distinct sociological approaches in religious studies. Durkheim has been criticized for having promoted “a nostalgic” conception of society, viewed as a large-scale community in which the individual is merely the site of the forces s/he is driven by. Yet, Paul Ladrière accurately demonstrates that Durkheim considered *the person* as the “social within the individual” and never was the promoter of an anti-individualistic sociology (Ladrière 1990).

It is important to note that Durkheim’s aim was to build sociology and he insisted on the need to address the *social* part of individual behaviour, not because he denied the reality of individualism — quite the reverse — he wanted to construct a scientific sociology beyond psychology. In so doing, Durkheim insisted, from *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* (1894) to *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), on the need to constitute a form of explanation about the origins and developments of religious feelings and practices using an evolutionist and functionalist method that exactly went beyond those dependent on psychology (Sumpf 1965).

As is the case for other objects of study, religion can, in Durkheim’s terms, be explained by solely social causes that postulate the priority of “the social” over “the individual” (Moscovici 1988). Therefore religion is considered *as* society (*EFRL*) and society as a “machine producing gods”— a statement that for him explains why religion is a widespread, even universal, phenomenon (Moscovici 1988). Through his sociological problematic, even *apparently* individualistic expressions of religious life turn out to be — in matter of fact — social by nature. In the section of *Les Formes* in which Durkheim comparatively explores the features of totemism, he clearly defines the *individual* forms of totemism as *social* (1912).

In his project of building a rationalist, scientific sociology that aims to study phenomena regarding collective psychology (though not in Gabriel Tarde’s terms), Durkheim made the individual the locus of the social forces shaping her/him (Durkheim 1988). Durkheim indeed refers to different forms of individualism, and does not assign them the same ontological status. But in an 1898 paper entitled “*L’individualisme et les intellectuels*” (Individualism and the Intellectuals), Durkheim addressed the issue of individualism and its place in the nascent sociology, pointing at the ambivalence of individualism in all of its guises in late nineteenth century Europe.

Steven Lukes published a first translation of the paper in 1969, in the journal *Political Studies* (Lukes 1969), discussed further in his book

Durkheim: His Life and Work (1972) and later in Peter Hamilton's *Emile Durkheim: Critical Assessments* (1990). Robert Bellah also published and discussed a translated version of this text in his 1973 *On Morality and Society*. Seventy years after the first publication of this paper in French, "Individualism and the Intellectuals" reached an English-speaking audience and still remains a key (if criticized) contribution to Durkheimian sociology outside France. French sociologists, however, seem to have been less interested by this small piece, and still rely on the Durkheim's major monographs (*Les règles de la méthode sociologique* [*The Rules of Sociological Method*], *De la Division du travail social* [*The Division of Labour in Society*], *le Suicide* [*Suicide*], *les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* [*EFRL*]) in their reconstruction of Durkheim's understanding of the individual. Yet, "L'individualisme et les intellectuels" contains interesting accounts and explicit arguments by Durkheim himself about individualism and religion.

In that piece, on the one hand, Durkheim contends that individualism is seen as a kind of "utilitarian egoism" as framed by economics (Spencer in particular). On the other hand, individualism also refers to the moral values attributed to the individual itself — be they "good" or "bad." In this second motif, Durkheim describes what he calls "spiritual individualism" as being *like* a religion, or even as a kind of *surrogate* religion (well before it became a fashionable conceptual term within social sciences) when he argues that individualism places "*man*" at the very heart of this new "cult" — to the point of a sanctification of the individual. As he states, "This religion is individualistic, since it has man as object, and man is, by definition, an individual. Yet, there is no other system in which individualism is more intransigent. Nowhere else are the individual's rights affirmed with more energy, since the individual is at the forefront of sacred things" (author's translation, Durkheim 2002: 6). "Spiritual individualism," in Durkheim's words, is not, as it seems to be, a secular ideology capable of dissolving religious institutions and beliefs, and consequently, liquefying the social layers of religious ideas. As he concludes: "Not only is individualism not anarchy, but it is henceforth the only belief system able to guarantee the moral unity of the country" (ibid.:11).

Schoenfeld (1990) has demonstrated that Durkheim's analysis of this type of individualism was much closer to what sociologists now call the "privatization" of religion than to the anomie he described in *Le Suicide* (1897). Consequently, and following Schoenfeld's conception of individualization processes in this respect, this kind of individualism tends much more to the development of moral values than to their demise (Schoenfeld 1990). Individualization has therefore a *structuring*

rather than a *destructive* effect on society. This “*homo homini deus*,” to quote Filloux (1990: 42), is a full part of Durkheim’s project, inspired by Saint-Simon, of giving social science a *mission*, and making (engaged) scientists seem like secular priests for a group “in communion” (Filloux 1990: 43). For Filloux, this is far more than just a metaphor: in Durkheim’s view the individual had *really* become sacred in modernity and, in the name of sociology and society, Durkheim acted like a defender of the secular faith that he witnessed rising. Durkheim’s “collectivism” was more than just an epistemological and methodological tool; it was also a way of being and working in a “group” of leading intellectuals (Mucchielli 1995). Strangely, Durkheim’s masterpiece, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, published almost fifteen years later in 1912, did not deal the same way with the issues of individualism addressed previously. Durkheim’s conceptions of individualism thus vary amongst several different formulations: individualism as a necessary and important component of organic-solidarity; individualism-as-anomie; individualism-as-institutionalized (modern or not)-form-of-religion; and finally individualism-as-religion (cf “L’individualisme et les intellectuels”).

TURNING THE MODEL ON ITS HEAD: THE PRAGMATICS OF INDIVIDUAL RELIGIOUS LIFE

As discussed above, French sociologists repeatedly assert that individualization was a very significant feature of the modernization of religions in the West (and of the West) and indeed socio-graphic records — whether quantitative, such as a nation-wide censuses, or qualitative, as found in personal interviews and local ethnographies — regularly mention the emphasis social actors place on their individual freedom in religious contexts (for Europe, see Hervieu-Léger & Davie 1996, or Willaime 2004). Does this then mean that sociologists are right to suggest that both religious commitment and religion are in danger? It has been noted that the ontological status of the modern “individual” is fragile and oscillates between empirical reality and constructed abstraction (Gauchet 1979). Moreover, the increased positive valorization of the “private”, the “subjective” and the “self” in discourses and references of modern societies might correspond, in France, to the residual influence of *personae* as conceptualized in Roman Catholicism, reinvented as a vital cultural feature of modernity (Dumont 1983).

In this regard, Louis Dumont’s *homo aequalis* (1977), a much-discussed theorization of the rise of a culture of individualism in the West and of the roots of modern models of economy, is important. In a critical

reading of Dumont, Marcel Gauchet drew attention to the fact that the rise of this individualism was related to the transformation of law and legal principles in the West. If in the beginnings of the process in the Middle Ages, the problem of the "individual" is a practical (legal) issue, it has slowly shifted toward a philosophical one (Gauchet 1979). And there is the individual as the "principal hero of modernity" (Martucelli 1999: 553) epitomizing the demise of "society"; it amounts to the alteration of social solidarity under the influence of individualization processes. This process thus logically becomes the "enemy of social theory" (Martucelli 1999: 559) because sociology has been inclined to emphasize the "social person" rather than purely idiosyncratic expressions of subjectivity. But this then yields another question: Was sociology entirely reluctant to understand social forces from the individual standpoint and to what extent was Durkheim responsible for this?

One does not need to forget that at the time, Durkheim's reflections on religion were important to the emerging academic sociology of France. Emmanuel Mounier, founder of the theory of "personalism", followed Charles Renouvier and argued for a new social and moral contract based on the idea of "the person", which was a counter-model of individualism. If, in Louis Dumont's anthropological views, the idea of "the person" represents the religious (Christian) root of western secular individualism (Dumont 1983), Renouvier's personalism stands for a (Christian) humanistic model of the person, *but not anomic individualism*. Recent revisions of Durkheim's views on religion otherwise establish the intellectual proximity of the founder of French sociology with this humanistic and "individualistically" oriented project of reshaping religion (Isambert 1992). Emmanuel Kant, one of the main philosophical influences on Durkheim in *EFRL*, underlined the fact that humankind has always been torn between inclinations to socialize and a repulsion about being with others, i.e., the opposing forces of socialization and individualization (Kant 1947: 31). Furthermore, the status of *the individual* in sociological theories refers to a complex dialogical interplay (at times antagonistic) between philosophical models of history, the epistemological status of the psycho-biological entity of the self/person, and the ideological projects of modern societies. If an inflated sense of the subjective and the "individual" in popular discourses has interested the sociologists who have made this an emblem of modernity, it has otherwise been criticized as the sign of a proliferation of narcissist expressions of the self (Lasch 1996). Besides, and additionally, if most French sociologists believe that the achievement of modernity is best illustrated by individualization processes, others, like Michel Maffesoli (1988), from the opposite

perspective, contend that individualism is declining under the influence of postmodern “tribalism.”

In contemporary religious studies, a number of authors nowadays challenge the conflation of “individualization” and “modernization.” Roland Campiche, a Swiss sociologist, questioned the very nature of religion in modernity while asking, “Does individualism still remain the prominent paradigm in Late Modernity?” (Campiche 2003). Campiche does not discard the paradigm of religious individualism but his research indicates that other processes are today reshaping religious experience in late modernity. According to Campiche, as the case of Switzerland demonstrates, religion displays “two faces”: one concerns traditional transcendental and collective, sacred objects (God); the other face is a more intimate, private, or “modern” relationship to the supernatural. Individualization, in this respect, is not a substitute for, but an alternative mode of, becoming committed to religion in modernity. Sociologist and political scientist Raphael Liogier goes even further. Following the “globalist” perspective of Roland Robertson’s sociology of religion, wherein globalization entails direct connection between individuals and global forces, Liogier’s work suggests, in the context of globalization, that the individual has become both a *model* and *locus* for religion and that religious organizations have been prompt to respond to this new “religious culture” by supplying “individualized” products (Liogier 2009).

The problem with “the individual” is that it epitomizes the key figure of a project *in the making* (Isambert 1993) and “works as a totalizing image” of mainstream culture for the whole society (Benassayag 1998). Following Dumont, Marcel Gauchet extends this idea and regards the individual as an “illusion of independence and self-sufficiency of a subject supposed to exist ontologically before society whereas it is, in this belief in particular, a creation of the later” (author’s translation of Gauchet 1979: 454). Most compellingly though, as emphasized by Liogier (2009), are the claims for “individual” choice in the religious sphere being expressed by both individual and institutional actors.

Contrary to a simplistic approach that would consider discourses as transparently illustrating social tendencies, a pragmatic perspective considers them performative acts (Obadia 2009), especially in the case of “individualistic” claims expressed by religious *organizations*. As a widespread and culturally accepted collective representation, “the individual” has indeed become a normative reference for religions, a yardstick by which religious traditions are compelled to reinvent themselves in order to strategically match the mainstream values of modernity. In contrast to Durkheimian conceptions of ritual performance, this pragmatist approach drawn from the speech-act theories of John Searle and

J. L. Austin, stresses the performance of meaningful acts in a way more appropriate to postmodern life.

The discursive emphasis on the religious experiences of individuals can be observed in many different traditional contexts: I have recorded it for French Buddhists (Obadia 1999); Olivier Roy did the same for European and globalized Muslims (Roy 2004); Danièle Hervieu-Léger and Grace Davie for Catholics in Europe (Hervieu-Léger 1996); and Jean-Paul Willaime has observed the same process in different religious groups around Europe (Willaime 2004). European Buddhist leaders for instance, insist in their teaching that what they supply has nothing to do with religion, piety, and belonging, but relates to an inner and personal sense of spirituality. I noticed similar references to “individual-oriented faith” and “personal choice” in the preaching of imams and rabbis in the same area of Europe. Recent Christian apologists in Europe also recast their religion in individualistic terms. This “individual-styled” connection to religion appears to be a fashion, and moreover, a kind of *normative* way for individuals and organizations to fashion their attitudes toward religion. Originally, this was a secular issue but it has quickly turned into a theological one.

On the one hand, for religious social actors, the desire for an “individualized” connection to the sacred resonates with the modern valorization of freedom. On the other hand, this is common discourse also appropriated by churches and religious organizations (whatever tradition they adhere to) as a strategy to adjust to modern cultural models and, more prosaically, to supply “individualistic” items (beliefs, practices) in response to “individual” demand (for Buddhism, see Obadia 1999; for Islam, see Haenni 2005; for Christianity, see Dubois 2004; for Judaism, see Cohen 1989, among others).

This line of argument might seem somewhat remote from my starting point, namely an examination of the relevance of Durkheim’s so-called “sociologism” in contemporary sociology of religion. As emphasized in the last section, “individualism” is far from being merely a matter of historical and social “reality” to which social sciences should adapt, but is also a multifaceted symbol of “modernity” to which religious actors, both individual and collective, refer. As such, the epistemological status of individualism is shifting from holistic realism to pragmatist constructivism and is suggestive of a similar shift in the methodology for studying “individualization” processes in the religious sphere. For European French-speaking sociologists, the main question still remains — how are religions responding to modern individualism? The responses have been limited to the problem of individualism as originally religious and lately secular, and to the measure of its impact on a collectivist model of reli-

gion. Beyond the simple issue of the epistemological relevance of “individualism” (as a conceptual tool to depict and account for social and religious change in modern societies), there remains the possibility of re-locating the problem in the pragmatic framework of a *micro-politics* and *poetics* of “the individual.” Shifting the location of the concern with the (religious) individual and individualism from the domain of epistemological expertise circumscribed to the Academic milieu, to performative and strategic discourses manifested among religious actors (be they individuals or organizations), adjusting their attitudes and position to the prominent cultural models of modernity inspired by Foucault’s theory of empowerment (see Kong 2001), offers a brand new approach to religious individualism as produced by *actors* and not only discussed by *scholars*.

CONCLUSION

To what extent then, is Durkheim’s theory of religion outdated? This is not certain. Indeed, the rise and development of individualism in the West, and elsewhere, has been a threat to religious commitment and community and, therefore, to “tradition.” But, as a matter of fact, the debate cannot be deepened without a precise examination of the already existing conceptual terminology. This paper does not attempt to trace all of the meanings of “individualism” for sociologists of religion, rather it tries to pinpoint recurrent uses of the term in academic assaults against Durkheim’s sociology in general, and his approach to religion in particular. French conceptions of individualism waver between the rise of the individual as a historical opportunity for the achievement of the ideals of modernity (e.g., “freedom”; the “self”), and the individual as a *threat* to society. These conceptions stand at opposite ends of the intellectual continuum of sociological theories.

My aim was not only to emphasize the fact that when modern — or rather *modernist* — sociologists allege that Durkheim’s sociological take on religion is obsolete, one can quite easily find elements in Durkheim’s writings pointing to the contrary. *EFRL*’s model of religion was obviously a sociological one, limiting the possibility to conceptualize individual expressions of religion in words other than social ones, since society provides the symbolic models and material conditions by which religion is expressed. Whilst the individual is a byproduct of society in the *EFRL*, *Le Suicide* had portrayed a more pessimistic model of individualism under its anomic forms, and finally “L’individualisme et les intellectuels” framed a rather positive counter-model of the individual — as an ideological project for modernity. Consequently, criticisms

of Durkheim's "sociologism," advocating "individualism" instead, are often misplaced since they forget that Durkheim was himself convinced of the rise of a "spiritual individualism" as a modern *social fact*, as well as being nostalgic for ancient and allegedly "collectivist" forms of religion, or romantic about the simpler collective religions of the Other in Australia and North America. Finally, a pragmatist approach to the categories of religious studies was offered as a means to escape from both the circular and ultimately unhelpful debate of "individual" versus "society" and the tautological discussion of "individualism-or-sociologism" in the definition of religion, given the circumstance that they also serve as "indigenous" resources for religious organizations in the context of self-identification in modernity. In other words, one might have to prudently consider the claims for spiritual individualism when they obviously originate in and serve religious (social) organizations, and as such, individualism is social by (discursive) nature.

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