

SACRED/PROFANE

– THE DURKHEIMIAN ASPECT OF

WILLIAM JAMES'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION*

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"In a word, the old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born... but this state of incertitude and confused agitation cannot last forever. A day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence, in the course of which new ideas arise and new formulae are found which serve for a while as a guide to humanity; and when these hours shall have been passed through once, men will spontaneously feel the need of reliving them from time to time in thought, that is to say, of keeping alive their memory by means of celebrations which regularly reproduce their fruits" (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 427-8).

Moral mediocrity was the vehement statement used by Émile Durkheim to describe his time. Dead or aged gods and unborn ones constituted the backdrop against which a faint hope rested: that new gods appeared and gave sense to worship rituals. Meanwhile, William James embodied the opposite of the French sociologist's expectant pessimism. Declining rites, ceremonies, and theologies gave James a robust hope: that the shell of

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religion led to its core, i.e. each individual's acts and feelings before the deity. Faced with a common horizon (i.e. increasingly complex societies, inevitability of answering the dominant scientific speech, academic susceptibility towards religion, decline of traditional creeds, etc.) Durkheim and James have developed two of the most influential twentieth-century conceptualizations on religion.

Two significant similarities between their theories concern methodology: on the one hand, their points of departure when dealing with the religious phenomenon are allegedly scientific –or at least not incompatible with science– conceptions; on the other hand, both leave aside beliefs and representations as the core of religion, and instead regard experience as its axis.

As it is well known, both authors are normally conceived of as representing two opposite theories. The first interpretation which considers both theories as radically opposed is Durkheim's. In *Pragmatism and Sociology* he strongly criticizes pragmatism as a philosophical project, the main target of this attack being the work of William James, whom Durkheim regards as its main representative. Meanwhile, the French school of sociology did not substantially modify the Durkheimian criticism of pragmatism. The inverse relationship was not too fruitful either, since those theoreticians interested in James's work (mainly philosophers and psychologists) did not relate him to Durkheim.¹ In other words, Émile Durkheim is conceived of as one of the most prominent figures of *collectivism* and/or *sociologism*, while William James's work is regarded as one of the paradigms of *individualism* and/or *psychologism*.² Their conceptions of religion, meanwhile, have been interpreted following a

¹ Jack Barbalet (2004) and Hans Joas (1997) stand out among remarkable exceptions.

² Joas (1997) and Sue Stedman Jones (2003) have nuanced the differences between James and Durkheim. The former sustaining that Durkheim as well as James highlight the value of experience over conceptualization regarding religious issues. Meanwhile, Stedman Jones stresses the importance of James's work for the central arguments of *The Elementary Form of Religious Life*.

similar pattern: Durkheim is the sociologist who is interested in the ritualistic and collective aspect of religion; James, on the other hand, is the psychologist who analyzes the individual and personal relationship with the deity, which he conceives as the core of religion.

Without disregarding the differences between both perspectives, my hypothesis in this article is that James's philosophy of religion has a Durkheimian aspect. As it is well known, Durkheim considers the distinction between the sacred and the profane to be the axis of religion. For James, on the other hand, the core of religion seems to be the individual relationship with the deity, as mentioned before. The point of contact between both conceptions lies in the fact that the Jamesian definition implies a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane, which is a prototypically Durkheimian one which helps to tint the canonical version of a James who is irremediably imbued with individual Protestantism. In other words, the sacred/profane distinction is essential for James's philosophy of religion, and this point is best appreciated in his treatment of morality. Besides, this distinction is of vital importance to understand the relationships of James's philosophy with conservative as well as with liberal Protestantism.

My argument unfolds in five parts. In the first one (Durkheim interprets James) I present essential aspects of the French sociologist's criticism of the pragmatist; in the second (Durkheim interprets religion) I characterize the axis of religion according to Durkheim, that is, the distinction between the sacred and the profane; in the third section (James: Durkheimianism and Individualism) I present some of the essential aspects of James's philosophy of religion and I advance my main hypothesis, namely that there is a Durkheimian aspect in James's philosophy of religion; in the fourth section (James and Durkheim: past, present, and future of religion) I briefly examine the importance of the Durkheimian aspect of the Jamesian conception of

religion for its relationship with Protestantism. Finally, I put forward some conclusions.

I. Durkheim interprets James

In the conclusion to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (hereafter called *The Elementary Forms*) Durkheim performs a critical analysis of some of James's paradigmatic positions, calling him "an apologist for faith." As it is well known, the main purpose of this book is to redefine the religious phenomenon on the basis of the developments of ethnography, anthropology, and sociology. Such a purpose is in turn based on an *epistemological rupture*, i.e. the theoretical treatment of religion completely disregards the involved actors' interests, doctrines, etc. to focus exclusively on the *function* of religion. In my view, however, Durkheim repeatedly violates his own principle by using phenomenological evidence as an illustrative example, or, even worse, to prove an argument. For instance, in *The Elementary Forms* he writes:

From this point of view, it is readily seen how group of regularly repeated acts which form the cult get their importance. In fact, whoever has really practiced a religion knows very well that it is the cult which gives rise to these impressions of joy, of interior peace, of serenity, of enthusiasm which are, for the believer, an experimental proof of his beliefs (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 417).

This kind of appeal to ordinary believers' practice and the importance of the knowledge they gain from it is theoretically inconsistent with Durkheim's methodological principles. In this work, however, I do not intend to assess the consistency of the Durkheimian epistemological rupture. What I am interested in highlighting is that from the beginning Durkheim's perspective on religion is, or claims to be, *external*.

Whenever we try to explain something human, viewed at a particular moment in time –whether a religious belief, a legal precept, a moral law, an aesthetic practice or an economic system- we must begin by returning to its simplest and most

primitive form. We must try to discover the qualities that define it at this period of its existence, and then show how it gradually developed, grew more complex, and became what it is at the moment under scrutiny (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 3).

Thus, it can hardly be surprising that Durkheim's conception is radically opposed to James's. The core of his criticism is the Jamesian thesis of the sovereign individual authority in religious matters, which is unacceptable to Durkheim. We can therefore speculate that one of the paragraphs from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (from now on *The Varieties*) which Durkheim must have found particularly irritating was the following:

The pivot round which the religious life, as we have traced it, revolves, is the interest of the individual in his private personal destiny. Religion, in short, is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism. The gods believed in—whether by crude savages or by men disciplined intellectually—agree with each other in recognizing personal calls. Religious thought is carried on in terms of personality, this being, in the world of religion, the one fundamental fact. To-day, quite as much as at any previous age, the religious individual tells you that the divine meets him on the basis of his personal concerns. (James (2002) [1902] 472).

Thus, the point to be highlighted is that Durkheim's and James's approaches are, in principle, irreconcilable: an *external* perspective, from Durkheim's point of view, based on a historical investigation method which critically reformulates the religious phenomenon as it is experienced by individuals; an *internal* perspective, for James, where the actors' experience and the theoretician's role is mainly descriptive.³ May it be

³ Stedman Jones maintains that both views are necessary for the treatment of religion and that consequently Durkheim and James complement each other: "Thus, do we not come back to a Jamesian point that knowledge by acquaintance, rather than merely knowledge by description, preserves the *sui generis* nature of religion? The fully adequate methodology of religion needs the testimony for consciousness as much as description about social action. In other words, are not both James and Durkheim necessary for a comprehensive study of religion?" (2003, 118).

possible, then, that there exist relevant similarities between perspectives which, in principle, are opposed? There are two elements which should be considered: in the first place, the salvific component of the religious experience which both make reference to; in the second place, their methodological coincidence.

It is in the final pages of *The Elementary Forms*, where Jamesian echoes undoubtedly resound, that we can find an answer to the first point. Like James, Durkheim highlights the *salvific* component of religion: "The first article in every creed is the belief in salvation by faith." (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 416). In this line of thought the author holds

But the believers, the men who lead the religious life and have a direct sensation of what it really is, object to this way of regarding it, saying that it does not correspond to their daily experience. In fact they feel that the real function of religion is not to make us think, to enrich our knowledge, nor add to the conceptions which we owe to science other origin and another character, but rather, it is to make us act, to aid us to live. *The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them* (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 416, my emphasis).

Meanwhile, in the conclusion to *The Varieties* and with the same purpose as Durkheim, James adheres to the following Leuba's statement:

"... *God is not known, he is not understood; he is used—sometimes as meat-purveyor, sometimes as moral support, sometimes as friend, sometimes as an object of love. If he proves himself useful, the religious consciousness asks for no more than that. Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he? are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse*" (Leuba quoted in James (1994) [1902] 489, second emphasis added).

The extent of the agreement between both authors can be appreciated on the basis of these two quotations: the

essence of religion and of the religious experience, independently of the content of beliefs, lies in its vital utility. Besides, this vital utility is independent of the different origin that it has for both authors: a ritual activity (Durkheim), and an individual's pondering in solitude (James).

Meanwhile, it was Hans Joas who most clearly emphasized another similarity between these authors, by holding that for both of them religious experience is the point of departure for formulating a theory of religion (Joas (1997) chap. 3 y 4). If Joas is right, both James and Durkheim –independently of the internal and external perspectives that I mentioned before– agree in pointing out that the religious *experience* is both the essential feature of religion and the starting point for its analysis.⁴ Now what is the religious experience? James explicitly restrains himself from advancing a definition of religion and of religious experience to later defend them tooth and nail. What he holds is a hypothetical or wide definition of religion (religion is what makes reference to the individual's relationship with what he regards as the divinity) to then inductively deal with the various cases of people he regarded as religious geniuses. An important consequence can be inferred from this methodology: what is relevant is experience, not content. Joas has called attention to this point: at first sight James's *vagueness* differs from Durkheim's rigor when defining religious experience.

For our definition of the sacred is that it is something added to and above the real: now the ideal answers to this same definition; we cannot explain one without explaining the other. In fact, we have seen that if collective life awakens religious thought on reaching a certain degree of intensity *it is because it brings about a state of effervescence which changes the conditions of psychic activity*. Vital energies are over-excited, passions more active, sensations stronger; there are even some which are produced only at this moment. A man does not recognize himself; he feels himself transformed and consequently he transforms the environment which surrounds

him. In order to account for the very particular impressions which he receives, he attributes to the things with which he is in more direct contact properties which they have not, exceptional powers and virtues which the objects of everyday experience do not possess. *In a word, above the real world where his profane life passes he has placed another which he attributes a higher sort of dignity than the first*. Thus, from a double point of view it is an ideal world (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 422, my emphasis).

In Joas's words, "Durkheim believes, then, that he has discovered in the elementary forms of religion the secret of religion per se: the dynamic formation of ideals in the experience of collective ecstasy" (Joas 2000 [1997] 60).

On the basis of these elements it can be inferred that the sharp Jamesian feature that is observed in *The Elementary Forms* is the following: what is necessary in religion is not doctrines, but *either an action or a feeling*.

When we survey the whole field of religion, we find a great variety in the thoughts that have prevailed there; but the feelings on the one hand and the conduct on the other are almost always the same, for Stoic, Christian, and Buddhist saints are practically indistinguishable in their lives. The theories which Religion generates, being thus variable, are secondary; *and if you wish to grasp her essence, you must look to the feelings and the conduct as being the more constant elements* (James (2008) [1902] 487, my emphasis).

In other words, representations are secondary to the primary element of religion, i.e. *some kind of religious experience* (feelings for James, rites for Durkheim). The archetypal example provided in *The Varieties* is that of individuals of *healthy mind* (that is, essentially optimistic individuals) who profess creeds with *sinister* theologies, in James's words. Thus, according to James, character or temperament have priority over the doctrinaire component as the core of religion.⁵ In a similar vein, Durkheim rejects the comparison of religion with a system of ideas, emphasizing the constituent role of religious energy.⁶

⁴ Joas (1997, 62).

⁵ See James (1994 [1902]) conferencias 4 y 5.

⁶ See Durkheim (1968 [1912]) 428.

The theorists who have undertaken to explain religion in rational terms have generally seen in it before else a system of ideas, corresponding to some determined object...

But it is hard to see how a mere idea could have this efficacy. An idea is in reality only a part of ourselves; then how could it confer upon us powers superior to those which we have of our own nature? Howsoever rich it might be in affective virtues, it could only release the motive powers which are within us, neither creating them nor increasing them. From the mere fact that we consider an object worthy of being loved and sought after, it does not follow that we feel stronger afterwards; *it is also necessary that this object set free energies superior to these which we ordinarily have at our command and also that we have some means for making these enter into us and unite themselves to our interior lives* (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 416-7, my emphasis).

If we compare *The Varieties* and *The Elementary Forms*, similarities and differences can be found between their authors' proposals. Durkheim, as rightly pointed out by Stedman Jones (2003), explicitly rivals James as a theoretician of religion. His subsequent examination of pragmatism, however, follows a different course. As it is well known, Durkheim taught a course on pragmatism at the Sorbonne in 1913-14. The notes of this course were published as late as 1955 under the title *Pragmatism and Sociology* (from now on *P and S*).⁷ This book brings up interesting and well-founded criticism to James's philosophy, such as the inconsistency between some distinctive features of the religious people presented by the pragmatist and his valuation of action over quietness, contemplation, and speculation. In Durkheim's words:

The great virtues of the saint are devotion, charity, spiritual strength (resignation, contempt of danger), purity of life (a horror of everything bogus or deceitful), asceticism (which can even include a love of suffering) and obedience and poverty. These virtues are usually the opposite of those of the man of action (Durkheim (1983) [1955] 61).

⁷ Armand Cuvillier has written a very good introduction to the book, where he makes reference to how they got the notes the book is based on, as well as to the strong impact that the course seems to have had among Durkheim's students.

It is in this sense that the French sociologist prefigures one of the main contemporary interpreters of James, Richard Gale, who maintains as the core of his interpretation the tension in James's work between a pragmatic Promethean ethics on the one hand, and an antipragmatic mysticism on the other.⁸ However, the *tone* of Durkheim's analysis of pragmatism in general, and of James's work in particular substantially differs from that used in *The Elementary Forms*. Durkheim points out only one coincidence between the criticisms of pragmatism and sociology to old rationalism:

Such is the conception that Schiller, James and Dewey have of rationalism. Traditional rationalism separates thought from existence. Thought is in the mind; existence is outside it. Hence the two forms of reality can no longer meet... the only way to solve the difficulty would be to refuse to admit the existence of this gap between existence and thought. If thought is an element of reality, if it is part of existence and of life, there is no longer any "epistemological abyss" or "perilous leap." We have only to see how these two realities can participate in each other (Durkheim (1983) [1955] 16).

It is the criticism of both to the "old rationalism" what makes them, in Durkheim's words, "children of the same epoch." However, no more parallelisms are drawn, and a fierce criticism of pragmatism is expressed in the rest of the book, whose conclusion states that pragmatism is less an endeavor that highlight the role of action but an attack against theoretical thought (Durkheim (1983) [1955] 64). Thus, Durkheim's major criticism of pragmatism is that it is a movement against reason. At the very beginning of *P and S* he points out three reasons which make pragmatism a subject of interest at different levels. First, its relevant criticism of traditional rationalism; second, the fact that it poses both a challenge and a threat for the French rationalist and Cartesian culture; finally, that it represents a criticism of general philosophical relevance (Durkheim (1983) [1955] 23).

⁸ See Gale (2007).

As rightly pointed out by Joas, Durkheim has always emphasized differences over similarities with pragmatism (Joas (1993) 57-9).⁹ In *The Elementary Forms* he seeks to clearly differentiate himself from James. Now why does he radicalize his criticisms in *P and S* and accuse pragmatism of being anti-speculative? A first answer to this question revolves around the epistemological level: in Durkheim's version, pragmatism as utilitarianism necessarily leaves aside the speculative component typical of the rationalist philosophical tradition. Neil Gross, analyzing the context where *P and S* was produced shrewdly suggests that there is something else: Durkheim sees in Anglo-American pragmatism, with its enormous impact on France, a rehabilitation of religion which does not rescue its cognitive component. In Gross's words:

Durkheim took this to mean that the pragmatists denied that religious ideas and beliefs stem from an intellectual desire on the part of agents to understand their worlds, especially their social worlds. Yet Durkheim's work on the sociology of religion provided proof that religious ideas and myths are indeed speculative and intellectual in nature. If so, and if religious ideas were the evolutionary precursors of the ideas of modern science and philosophy, then the validity of the pragmatic understanding of thought could be called into question (Gross, 1997, 140)

This may be the reason why he has always stressed his differences with pragmatism.

Several conclusions can be drawn from Durkheim's interpretation of James and pragmatism: first, that

⁹ "Joas (1995) suggests that Durkheim and James were among the first scholars to use religious experience as the basis for general theories about religious phenomena. Even more significant is that both Durkheim and the pragmatists were opposed to certain aspects of empiricism and apriorism; they "attempt to take the deduction of... [the a priori conditions for experience] beyond the domain of transcendental philosophy by inquiring how the individual intellect has to be equipped in order for any form of cognition to take place" (Joas 1993:57). Despite these similarities, "what emerges clearly ... is Durkheim's rhetorical strategy of not accentuating the similarities but rather the differences between pragmatism and his own program of sociology" (Joas 1993 [1998 in this work]:59)" Gross (1997) 129.

Durkheim conceives his work as programmatically opposed to pragmatism in *The Elementary Forms* as well as in *P and S*; second, that Durkheimian criticisms differ in their scope, since in *The Elementary Forms* he criticizes James's individualism – though he simultaneously rescues the salvific component of religion, which is common to both and his methodology is similar since its point of departure is religious experience and not a set of beliefs– while in *P and S* he holds much more radically that pragmatism, like all utilitarianisms, is anti-speculative and he only rescues it as a critical instance of old rationalism; finally, these criticisms make it difficult for us to appreciate those aspects common to the works of both authors beyond their noticeable differences. Thus, in the rest of this work I shall try to qualify these criticisms and to show how James's work presents an aspect which could be regarded as Durkheimian.

II. Durkheim as Interpreter of Religion

In *The Elementary Forms* Durkheim draws up an ambitious intellectual program with different objectives. Metatheoretically, those objectives could be understood in at least two ways: in their *minimalist* version they attempt to provide, on the basis of empirical data provided by ethnography and history, new answers to traditional philosophical questions; meanwhile, in their most ambitious version they imply developing a new philosophy based on sociology. Methodologically, however, both versions are indiscernible since their main axis is the decomposition of complex phenomena into their simplest and most primitive component parts. This forms the core of Durkheimian Cartesianism: tracing the simplest component part of the phenomenon to be analyzed (on the basis of ethnographic and historical data) so as to be able to define its basic features. Unlike in traditional Cartesianism, however, that simple phenomenon is not an abstract entity but a concrete historical fact (or concrete historical facts.) By applying this methodological conception to his definition (or

rather, re-definition) of religion, Durkheim explicitly criticizes the conception inherited from traditional philosophy (that is, the dialectical method) which defines religions on the basis of the fundamental beliefs they profess.¹⁰ It is for this reason that religious “ideas,” “beliefs,” or “doctrines” do not suffice to understand how religion fulfils its vital function. In other words, Durkheim does not deny the relevance of a religion’s doctrinal body but he holds that, if separate from the ritualistic aspects, it does not form the core of a religion and also that a doctrinal body does not help to understand the vitality given by a religion to those who profess it.¹¹ Instead, he holds that his conception of religion offers those elements. Such a claim is based first on the thesis that all religion offers some distinction between the sacred and the profane, and in the second place, on the statement that the cult is essential to make intelligible that distinction and its vitality. Thus, these elements make up the very core of religion for Durkheim. Concerning the first distinction, the French sociologist has written:

All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present a common quality: they presuppose a classification of things, --the real or ideal things that men represent for themselves-- into two classes, two opposite kinds, generally designated by two distinct terms effectively translated by the words *profane* and *sacred* (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 37).

Though he presents different aspects (subordination, more sublimity of the sacred against the profane, etc)

¹⁰ In Durkheim’s words: “The theorist who have undertaken to explain religion in rational terms have generally seen in it before all else a system of ideas, corresponding to some determined object. This object has been conceived in a multitude of ways: nature, the infinite, the unknowable, the ideal and so on. But these differences matter but little. In any case, it was the conceptions and beliefs which were considered as the essential elements of religion” (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 416).

¹¹ In this regard he has written: “religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things” (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 41).

Durkheim chooses to point out *heterogeneity* and *temporality* as the essential defining features of the sacred and the profane. In other words, the sacred and the profane are, above all, two heterogeneous (and opposed) realms, which are ruled by two temporalities. The profane is the realm of utility, or of everyday life governed by the logic of survival at the pace of economy and its temporality. The sacred, meanwhile, is the deliberate interruption of secular life and its development by conceiving certain objects, entities, or places as sacred through ritual activities. It is in this sense that religion is for Durkheim essentially *collective* since it involves a rupture of everyday social life in the community where it is professed. Then, cults and rites are for Durkheim the collective ways of religion. In rejection to the idea that the cult is a dull secondary manifestation of a primitive force, the French sociologist has written:

The cult is not simply a system of signs by which faith is expressed outwardly, it is the collection of means by which it is created and periodically recreates itself. Whether it consists in material acts or mental operations it is always this which is efficacious. (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 417).

Put differently, interiority as a feature of religion is only possible if it is preceded by a cult. Meanwhile, rites provide us with moral patterns of behavior before the sacred: “Finally, rites are rule of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred things” (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 41). Thus, the Durkheimian definition of religion can be more clearly appreciated on the basis of these two elements:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden –beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 47) emphasis original

Two aspects of Durkheim’s conception of religion are here of interest due to the objectives of the present work: in the first place, his idea on the genesis of the

distinction between the sacred and the profane¹²; in the second place, the idea of morality brought in by his conception of religion. Concerning the former, Durkheim makes the following point: since sensitive experience tells no self-evident thing on the sacred/profane distinction, we must trace its genesis to its function. In other words, why is the distinction between the sacred and the profane drawn? According to Durkheim there exists a force or energy associated with religion which does not depend on its doctrinal component (as in the Jamesian conception). The genesis of this energy lies in either a *genuinely* religious component (that is, the divinity, for instance) or in other component. The French sociologist's agnosticism prevents him from giving the first answer. According to Durkheim, the genesis of that energy lies in the fact that religion makes our existence as social beings evident *in extremis*.

This is precisely what we have tried to do, and we have seen that this reality which mythologies represented under so many different forms but which is the universal and objective eternal cause of these *sui generis* sensations out of which religious experience is made, is society (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 418).

Thus, the sacred seems to exist as a distinct sensation of our social nature.

The second aspect I have mentioned, meanwhile, is of the utmost importance to both Durkheim's work and James's conception of religion. As it was said before, for Durkheim there is an indissoluble link between religion and the idea of church, on the one hand, and between the church and the moral community, on the other. Ritual interdictions, which Durkheim conceives of as essential, directly govern the sacred realm and indirectly the profane (in so far as the latter is subordinated to the former). Were this the whole religious dimension of the

¹² In Durkheim's words: "for we must ask what has been able to lead men to see in the world two heterogeneous and incompatible worlds, though nothing in palpable experience seems to have suggested the idea of so radical duality to them" (Durkheim (2008) [1912] 42).

Durkheimian conception, this would be the antithesis of James's position, where a categorical distinction is made between religion and morality, the latter being fundamentally restrictive. Yet as Joas has rightly pointed out, the Durkheimian conception is twofold:

Thus, Durkheim builds into morality itself the same tension which James describes as obtaining between religion and morality. Neither thinker defines morality, as Nietzsche does, exclusively in terms of the imperative, so that religion can only be construed as the metaphysical justification of the imperative. The proximity between Durkheim and James is even greater in this respect than the differences in their conceptualization would at first lead one to suspect. However much Durkheim emphasizes the perpetually sacred character of morality, thereby extending his concept of the sacred far beyond the ambit of traditional religions, he also insists on the fact that the imperative is not 'in fact, the religious element in morality. However, one could demonstrate that the more sacred a moral rule becomes, the more the element of obligation tends to recede.' For Durkheim, as for James, the truly religious is not imperative, obligatory and restrictive, but rather attractive, empowering and motivating (Joas, 1997, 66)

In the next section I shall take up again both aspects (the genesis of the sacred/profane distinction and the Durkheimian conception of religion) in relation to James's work.

III. James: Durkheimianism and Individualism

Durkheim read James and rivaled him as a theoretician of religion.¹³ James, on the other hand, did not have the sociologist among his innumerable sources; therefore there is a risk of over interpretation when ascribing a Durkheimian aspect to James's philosophy of religion. In other words, *The Elementary Forms* was written one decade later than *The Varieties* and James makes no reference (at least in his main works) to any other works by Durkheim. Why, then, ascribe a Durkheimian aspect

¹³ Stedman Jones (2003). Joas (1997, cap. 4) goes one step further when holding that James was a decisive influence for Durkheim to take a definitive turn towards experience as the basis of his theory of religion.

to James's philosophy of religion? Simply because it allows us to visualize an essential feature of the Jamesian philosophy of religion, that is, the distinction between the sacred and the profane, that generally goes unnoticed. Put differently: James's philosophy of religion, in spite of differing from Durkheim's positions, fulfils its fundamental dictum: on the one hand, there is a profane domain which tends to be comparable to moral prescriptions; on the other hand, there is a sacred domain which tends to be comparable to a dimension that gives power (or creating power) to individuals. Like *The Elementary Forms, The Varieties* is an ambitious intellectual project which aims to reformulate our way of thinking about religion. James begins his book with a clear methodological reduction: his *corpus* consists mainly of the autobiographies and confessions of "religious geniuses," that is, those who have thought to have (or have had) a direct relationship with the divinity. These are, in James's words, the "extreme" cases that he wants to examine. In such a context, religion is defined as follows:

... religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*
(James (1994) [1902] 18) *cursiva original.*

This definition has an operative purpose (that is why the word "arbitrarily" is used) which makes sense with the development of *The Varieties*. Now if we just confine ourselves to this stipulation (and besides leave aside all the precautions taken by James) it is very simple to label James as a limited individualist and to contrast him, for instance, with Durkheimian pan-sociologism. However, if we thoroughly consider his point of departure together with the conceptual cores from *The Varieties*, we find a richness which is difficult to classify as limited individualism, since James presents a meticulous *phenomenology of religious souls* based on three ideal types: the experiences of the "healthy-minded", of the "sick souls" and finally, of the "reborn" or "twice-born."

When describing these ideal types James explicitly holds that real individuals do not generally exemplify only one of these categories but are hybrids between them. The healthy-minded are defined as those (pathologically, for James) optimistic individuals who cannot possibly perceive or feel evil in the world. Sick souls, just perceive or feel the world as intrinsically evil.¹⁴ The twice-born, meanwhile, are those sick souls that have recovered, which in James's words are the shrewdest ones, since they have been on both sides of the abyss.

One of the central topics of *The Varieties* undoubtedly revolves around the dialectic between the sick souls and the twice-born, which James called "redemption" process (James (1994) [1902] 76).¹⁵ Mysticism is one of the possible forms of redemption mentioned by James. In other words, mysticism is one of the ways in which sick souls can be reborn and it is a redemptive process in so far as those sick souls overcome their morbidity and stop feeling or perceiving the world as intrinsically evil. A detailed examination of the Jamesian conception of mysticism exceeds the scope of this work. However, the analysis of some of its features (*transiency and passivity*) is the best way of understanding why the distinction between the sacred and the profane is essential for the Jamesian philosophy of religion.

James lists four defining features of mysticism: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity

¹⁴ James sustains that this is "Not the conception or intellectual perception of evil, but the grisly blood-freezing heart-palsying sensation of it close upon one, and no other conception or sensation able to live for a moment in its presence. How irrelevantly remote seem all our usual refined optimisms and intellectual and moral consolations in presence of a need of help like this! Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! help! No prophet can claim to bring a final message unless he says things that will have a sound of reality in the ears of victims such as these" (James (1982) [1902] 162).

¹⁵ In his words: "the process is one of redemption, not of mere reversion to natural health, and the sufferer, when saved, is saved by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before." (James (1994) [1902] 157).

(James (1994) [1902] 179-180). *Transiency* is described as follows:

Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day. Often, when faded, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory; but when they recur it is recognized; and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance. (James (1994) [1902] 180).

Passivity, meanwhile, implies that:

Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped by a superior power. (James (1994) [1902] 180).

Put differently: the mystical state in so far as it is sacred leads to the transient interruption of profane life, and in so far as it is passive involves a clear distinction between two spheres (or realms, in Durkheimian terms): a sacred sphere –the union or communication with the divinity – and a profane one— the individual separated from the divinity. Thus, it can be inferred that one of the essential conceptual cores of *The Varieties*, namely mysticism, rests on the sacred/profane distinction. Now how is this related with the hypothesis of the present work? The relationship is as follows: even the most refractory religious phenomenon for Durkheim (mysticism) can be interpreted on the basis of the sacred/profane conceptual pair.

Now for James mysticism is one of the multiple varieties of the religious experience. The question is if it makes sense to attribute the sacred/profane distinction to the rest of religious experiences (that is, the non-mystical ones.) In my view James distinguishes between a profane and a sacred domain in so far as he makes a sharp differentiation between religion and morality:

It was the extremer cases that I had in mind a little while ago when I said that personal religion, even without theology or ritual, would prove to embody some elements that morality pure and simple does not contain. (James (1994) [1902] 22)

The element pointed out by James as essentially religious is the “total attitude” towards the universe. While the religious attitude leads to enthusiastic, unconditional acceptance, the moral attitude can be one of mere resignation.¹⁶ In *The Varieties* he writes, for instance:

And here religion comes to our rescue and takes our fate into her hands. There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God. In this state of mind, what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety, and the hour of our moral death has turned into our spiritual birthday. (James (1994) [1902] 25).

As pointed out in the previous section, Joas emphasizes a similarity between James and Durkheim, namely that despite terminological differences both conceptions share a fundamental idea: while morality is essentially a domain of interdiction, religion is an attractive, motivating force which empowers the individual.

One possible objection to this approach would be that there is no coincidence between James and Durkheim since they have radically opposed conceptions of the sacred. For the latter, the sacred is a necessary ideal duplication of the real that serves both a cohesive and an empowering function for the individual; for James, on the other hand, the sacred would be the communication or union of the individual and the deity. This objection has a truthful core, that is, both conceptions diverge in relevant aspects. It is not the aim of the present work to

¹⁶ In this regard he has written in *The Varieties*: “morality pure and simple accepts the law of the whole which it finds reigning, so far as to acknowledge and obey it, but it may obey it with the heaviest and coldest heart” (James (1994) [1902] 41).

deny the obvious differences between James and Durkheim: first, the object they are set to explain: individuals in their solitude (James) versus individuals taking part in rites (Durkheim); second, the Jamesian fideism versus the Durkheimian agnosticism. They agree in a fundamental methodological point, however: the point of departure of the sacred/profane distinction (explicit and systematically developed by Durkheim on the one hand and implicitly supported by James on the other) is not the religious doctrines but the individual's experiences, activities, and feelings.

Not only does this coincidence imply the possibility of a direct Jamesian influence on Durkheim (as held by Joas) but it also gives us a hint to interpret James's philosophy of religion: the sacred/profane dichotomy implies that morality and religion cannot be considered equivalent.

IV. James and Durkheim: Past, Present, and Future of Religion

It is well known that Durkheim has developed his work within the framework of a European tradition where the distinction between the sacred and the profane (and the ecclesiastical mediation) had full significance.¹⁷ That is, until the Protestant Reformation, there was in Catholic Europe a clear-cut distinction between a sacred domain that the church was in charge of, and a profane domain which was essentially political. France may have been the European country where such a framework took less of a pounding from the Reformation.¹⁸ Although Durkheim was a fervent supporter of secularization, the incessant social transformation at the turn of the 20th century augured an individualism that he regarded as

dangerous. In short, for Durkheim the source of danger was that modern societies did not seem to be efficient at generating social cohesion.

James's viewpoint is utterly different. For him, the incessant transformation of the United States (from colony to world power within a century) was not a reason for being pessimistic. The author of *The Varieties* seemed to exemplify in philosophy the vigorous pioneer spirit that was so pervasive in the American social mindset.¹⁹ That mindset, in addition, seemed to be a clear example of the typical association between Protestantism, or more specifically Calvinism, and modernization which normally refers to Weber's classic work "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism."²⁰

Now how is the sacred/profane distinction (one foundation of Durkheim's conception as well as of James's in my interpretation) related with Protestantism as understood by James? A plausible hypothesis (as presented by Charles Taylor) is to argument that the Durkheimian framework is suitable for explaining certain kind of societies (essentially Catholic ones where there is a clear-cut distinction between the sacred and the profane) but it fails to grasp how Protestantism transformed that framework. In other words, Durkheim seems not to have noticed how the profane disappeared under the spell of Reformation, and how the sacred — hand in hand with morality— became omnipresent.

In Taylor's interpretation, James carried the Reformation individualism to the extreme, by conceiving a post-Durkheimian interpretation of religion (that is, one extricated from its communal aspect) which sounds convincing for vast contemporary groups.²¹ In other words, Taylor regards Durkheim's theory as particularly

¹⁷ Regarding Durkheim's attempt at "assimilating" European culture and tensions with Judaism, see Birbaum (1995).

¹⁸ France, however, took a pounding from the French Revolution, which later led to the fierce fight between laicism and fundamentalism. This topic is, however, outside the scope of the present work. An excellent book describing Durkheim's role in this context is Richman's (2002).

¹⁹ As early as the turn of the 20th century James was analyzed under the figure of the pioneer by Josiah Royce (1912) and George H. Mead (1929).

²⁰ See Weber (1991 [1904]).

²¹ See Taylor (2004) chapter 3.

efficient when it comes to explain the past of religion, while present and future can better be dealt with by James.

This hypothesis contains some truthful cores, mainly concerning Durkheim's myopia before the consequences of the Reformation. It is not completely right, however, in the opposition it points out between Durkheim and James, where the latter prefigures, in Taylor's words, the religion of post-Durkheimian societies. In my view, James —unlike Durkheim, — clearly observes the danger of the profane being absorbed by the sacred and he therefore separates religion and morality. The groundwork for his opposition, which is of great relevance for the present work, consists in what I call his Durkheimian aspect: the distinction between the sacred and the profane.

In other words, the modernizing myth which Protestants find agreeable is that there exists no sacred/profane distinction, and that it is that sacralization of the world (or elimination of the profane domain) on the basis of the Protestant ethic what has made possible our contemporariness.²² A detailed account of this story lies outside the scope of the present work. However, I shall briefly set out two reasons why, in my opinion, the modernizing myth is erroneous: in the first place (the least important in this context), because in pre-reformation Europe two types of morality were clearly distinguished, as rightly pointed out by Ernst Troeltsch: a strict one, which was mainly intended for ecclesiastical authorities, and a laxer one intended for laymen. The process of trying to rule all individuals with an iron fist can hardly be regarded as modernizing, as Calvinism claims. In the second place, (more relevant to this work) that "moral athletes," —as James calls them— and those who regard religion and morality as equivalents fail to grasp an essential element of religion, i.e. the religious sentiment. A great part of the value of *The Varieties* lies in his thorough description of cases that would

necessarily be left outside the religious domain if we accepted to equate religion and morality. As opposed to the sacralising tendencies of Protestantism (in its *progressive* Unitarian variant as well as in its *conservative* Fundamentalist variant) James recognizes a sacred core —the religious sentiment— opposed to the profane and which cannot possibly be equated to morality. In other words, James grasps an element that is essential to religion (and which tends to be overlooked by Protestantism.) One consequence of the Durkheimian aspect of James's philosophy of religion is therefore that it helps us expose the weakness of the modernizing myth based in the tight union between religion and morality, hence the importance of the Durkheimian aspect for James's philosophy of religion.

V. Conclusion

In relation to James's and Durkheim's conceptions of religion current interpretations claim that they are drastically opposed. On the contrary, authors like Hans Joas (1997, 1998), Sue Stedman Jones (2003), and Jack Barbalet (2004) among others, hold that there is a similarity between them in so far as both James and Durkheim depart from experience as the basis for the theory of religion. My hypothesis goes a step further by holding that there is a Durkheimian aspect, namely the distinction between the sacred and the profane, in James's philosophy of religion. What I aim to show in the present work is that such Durkheimian aspect is essential to get full understanding of James's philosophy of religion, importance which I tried to illustrate by briefly alluding to the opposition between certain Protestant conceptions.

²² See Joas (2012).

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