



# Religion as Self-Transcendence. A Simmelian Framework for Authenticity

Francesca Eva Sara Montemaggi

Volume 21, Number 1, 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041338ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041338ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Montemaggi, F. E. S. (2017). Religion as Self-Transcendence. A Simmelian Framework for Authenticity. *Simmel Studies*, 21(1), 89–114. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041338ar>

Article abstract

Georg Simmel's writings on religion have too often been overlooked, notwithstanding his undisputed status as one of the founders of sociology. Simmel's metaphysical inclination may give the impression that his thoughts on religion are closer to theology than sociology. This article proposes an interpretation of Simmel's notion of religiosity (*Die Religiosität*) in conjunction with the notion of self-transcendence, part of the philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*) he espoused towards the end of his life. The article does not pursue a filologically accurate position, but a development drawing on Simmel's notions. Accordingly, it is proposed to interpret religiosity as a sensitivity to self-transcendence, the awareness of social conditioning, or "facticity", and the striving towards going beyond it. The tension between facticity and self-transcendence reflects – what Simmel called – the 'conflict of culture', the 'malaise' of the fragmentation of the self resulting from the social differentiation of modern society. Religiosity, as a sensitivity to self-transcendence, is expressed in the pursuit of authenticity thus countering the conflict of culture. This interpretation allows us to see religion as a path, albeit not the only one, to authenticity, understood as challenging facticity, which echoes in later existentialist philosophy and contemporary empirical studies.

Francesca Eva Sara Montemaggi

## **Religion as Self-Transcendence. A Simmelian Framework for Authenticity**

### **Rethinking Simmel**

Georg Simmel showed a deep interest in religion throughout his career. He wrote his earliest essays at the turn of the century: *A Contribution to the Sociology of Religion* (1955 [1898]) and *A Contribution to the Epistemology of Religion* (1997 [1902]). His main essay, *Religion*, was written in 1906 and redacted in 1912. However, Simmel referred to religion in most of his writings. As his friend Max Weber described him, Simmel was religiously “musical”. While Weber saw religious traditions as producing different religious attitudes, Simmel was attuned to the religious sentiment in the individual. His religious “musicality” sometimes assumed quasi-mystical tones; yet Simmel’s interest was always the human psyche. What makes Simmel’s insights on religion compelling is the fact that religion is part of a broader thinking on modernity and social relations. Accordingly, religion is a way of being that reveals the consciousness of the person grappling with the cultural fragmentation of modern society.

Simmel’s analysis of religion has a social dimension and an individual dimension. The social dimension identifies belief as trust and religion as social unity (Laermans, 2006: 486). Religion binds together because it crystallises social relationships (Simmel, 1955 [1898]: 118; 1997 [1902]: 125-126; 1997 [1912]: 157-158). The sentiment of *pietas*, the feeling of being “bound to some general, higher principle” (Simmel, 1997 [1912]: 156), is projected onto social relations giving rise to a duty towards members of the group (Laermans, 2006: 484). I have discussed Simmel’s social dimension of religion and applied it to empirical data elsewhere (Montemaggi, 2017b). Here, I concentrate on the

individual dimension of religion as a form of consciousness and as a particular sensitivity. Building on Simmel's insight of religiosity as a sensitivity, I propose to understand it as a sensitivity to self-transcendence by linking it to his later *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life). This interpretation is not meant to be philologically accurate; rather it emerged from dialogue with ethnographic data and serves to aid contemporary accounts of religious narratives of authenticity, which I have explored elsewhere (Montemaggi, 2013 and 2017b) and which form part of an ongoing endeavour.

The first section of this article explores Simmel's thought on the individual dimension of religion. Accordingly, religion is a "form of consciousness", rather than a lifestyle, group belonging, or belief. Building on Simmel's insight of religiosity as a sensitivity, I propose to interpret it as a sensitivity to self-transcendence, in the light of Simmel's *Lebensphilosophie*. This is followed by a brief examination of Simmel's understanding of modernity and individualisation, which lays the ground for an interpretation of the conflict of culture as the cultural frame in which I posit the idea of authenticity as self-transcendence. I interpret self-transcendence as self-awareness and awareness of social conditioning, or, to borrow an existentialist term, "facticity", and an attempt at going beyond it. The final section examines the concept of "individual law" (*individuelle Gesetz*), through which Simmel theorised an ethical framework whereby moral duty emerges from the person's individuality rather than a general abstract law. I propose to link the individual law with religiosity and see the religious life as a path that requires self-transcendence. Religiosity can thus offer a path to develop one's authentic self.

### **The individual dimension of religion in Georg Simmel**

Modernity, for Simmel, posed a radical challenge to religion. He understood traditional religion as propositional belief in

relation to the transcendent, taking thus as a model modern Protestant Christianity (Ruel, 1982). Religion, as belief regarding the transcendent, was no longer tenable in modern times. Modern science defined the limits of rationality according to what was “provable” within a framework of positivist science. The content of religion could not survive modernity, dominated by instrumental rationality; yet a “yearning” for transcendence lingered on, leaving the religious person unfulfilled, “as if cut off from the path to its own life” (Simmel, 1997 [1911b]: 9). A new form of religion was required, one that enabled the religiosity of the individual to be expressed (Simmel, 1997 [1918]: 20).

Religion could remain relevant in the modern era only by turning inward, although not in the sense of receding into the private sphere (Luckmann, 1967), but by accentuating the inner experience of the individual, which was the modern *locus* of transcendence. Simmel saw in mystical religion the vehicle for the expression of human yearning (1997 [1911a]: 9). Mysticism, being focussed on the inner self, gave the individual a way to counter the modern fragmentation of the self. The *unio mystica*, union with the transcendent, is re-read by Simmel as psychological unity of the fragmented modern psyche.

The essence of mysticism is that we should perceive behind the given multiplicity of phenomena that unity of being which is never a given fact, and which therefore we can grasp directly only within ourselves as this unity. [...] This unifying of the fragments and contradictions of our view of the world by attributing to them one common, all-embracing source may be the earlier achievement of religion, historically speaking, but it is perhaps only of secondary importance. Of more fundamental significance, especially as far as modern man is concerned, is what religion makes of the contradictions of spiritual life. Just as this theistic or pantheistic mysticism reconciles the fragmentary nature of the world’s elements by unifying them in God, so religious behavior brings peace to the opposing and incompatible forces at work within the soul, resolving the contradictions they create (Simmel, 1997 [1904]: 36).

Simmel's language lends itself to a theological reading. In this vein, Vandenberghe (2010) proposes a careful account of Simmel, which stresses his fascination with Protestantism and his pantheistic vein within a Kantian framework. It is a persuasive way to interpret Simmel's ideas about religion. However, I resist any theological or, even, phenomenological readings and, instead, focus on Simmel's concern around the human mind against the fragmentary context of modernity. Accordingly, I understand Simmel's references to "soul" as "psyche", for Simmel's study of religion is a study of the human psyche. Religion, for Simmel, gave expression to a fundamental human need. Simmel understood individual religiosity (*Religiosität*) as a characteristic of the person. Simmelian religiosity is an innate disposition, a sensitivity, which is decoupled from a belief in the supernatural as well as from religious practice.

Simmel likened religiosity to an artist's sensitivity to the aesthetic aspects of life. Religiosity is a propensity, which does not necessarily translate into religious behaviour, as much as an artistic sensibility does not make one an artist, rather it is "the fundamental quality of being of the religious soul" (Simmel, 1997 [1911a]: 10), which can be deeply present in some individuals and only superficially in others. The religious person is religious in her "very being" (Simmel, 1997 [1911a]: 10). Simmel identified as characteristics of religiosity "the feelings of dependence and hopefulness, humility and yearning, indifference to mortality and the constraints of life" (Simmel, 1997 [1911a]: 10). For Simmel, religiosity was a state of mind that enables the person to see unity in the world around. He did not delve into the relationship between the feelings he associated with religiosity and the state of mind of religiosity. Instead, he emphasised how the religious person perceives an overarching unity. The psychological unity brought about by religion comes from religion being a synthetic schema, which orders the world around.

What makes a person religious is the particular way in which he reacts to life in all its aspects, how he perceives a certain kind of

unity in all the theoretical and practical details of life [...] Religiousness thus can be seen in this light: as a form according to which the human soul experiences life and comprehends its existence (Simmel, 1997 [1909]: 5).

Simmel was inconsistent in his use of the terms religion and religiosity. Nevertheless, a fundamental point in his thoughts on religion, is his formulation of religiosity as an attitude, which engenders a particular way of experiencing the world. Religiosity is thus not a mere preference, but a way of being, which shapes how a person experiences and lives life. Thus defined religiosity is a “mind-set” with blurred contours; yet for Simmel religiosity was more than – what we may call today – spirituality. Religion was a schema, or frame, ordering one’s life. It was a form of consciousness.

### **Religion as a form of consciousness**

Simmel’s reflection on religion does not stop at investigating the religious sentiment, but conceives of religion as an autonomous sphere, a language through which the person understands reality. Simmel understood religion within his epistemological framework of Forms and Contents<sup>1</sup>, where Forms are a shell that can contain and shape different empirical Contents. Simmel considered Forms as dependent on the Content taken and thus always changing. Forms “synthesise” knowledge giving rise to autonomous worlds (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: 55), like that of religion. Religion is a form of consciousness (Simmel, 1904: 36). As explained by Oakes,

[Simmel] describes forms as languages into which the world or aspects of it may be translated. These languages may be conceived as general schemata which constitute conditions for the intelligibility of the world as a whole or specific aspects of it

---

<sup>1</sup> The use of the capital ‘F’ for Forms and ‘C’ for Contents is to distinguish the epistemological concepts of Forms and Contents from all other meanings of these words.

[... each Form] “has its own definitive modes and its own characteristic language. Each form produces a representation of the world that is unique to the form itself” (Oakes, 1980: 10-11).

The Form of religion is a form of consciousness as a result of the “synthetic judgement” of the human mind. The synthetic view is a repeated sifting and ordering (Simmel, 2004 [1907]: 108-110) of reality on the basis of the mind’s constructs. The process of synthesis does not happen according to stable *a priori* Forms; it is relational. Simmel develops Kant’s notion of exchange (*Wechsel*) and grounds the unity provided by a Form in *Wechselwirkung*, a relationality, or relativity, as an “interrelationship” of knowledge of the world (Simmel, 2004 [1907]: 104). Simmel’s relativity is a “regulative world principle,” according to which “everything interacts in some way with everything else” (Pyyhtinen, 2010: 43). In other words, the religious person’s cognition gives unity to the world within a religious framework. Simmel wrote that religion had a totalising force (*Totalisierungsvermögen*). The multiplicity and contrasting aspects of life are unified within the religious consciousness, resolving the contradictions of modern life. Simmel’s conception of unity lends itself to be read as a form of pantheism, which is interrelational (Vandenberghé, 2010; Pyyhtinen, 2010). The principle of interaction *Wechselwirkung* relates all parts to a single whole.

Simmel’s unity is however not concerned with the cosmos, but with the person’s consciousness. Simmel’s longing for unity (Vandenberghé, 2010; Darmon and Frade, 2012) is more of an epistemological concern rather than a pantheistic oneness. The unity of religion is a “unity of interaction” (Simmel, 1997 [1912]: 201), where God is the abstraction of the interaction of existence. Like in the Greek “correspondence theory of truth”, this unity of existence, the “totality of the universe itself” (Simmel, 1997 [1911b]: 51), corresponds to the totality of the self; “the concept of God is the ultimate realization of personality [...] the wholeness and unity of His being is not subject to the

fragmentariness and incompleteness of temporal incoherence” (Simmel, 1997 [1911b]: 51).

The modern self, for Simmel, is made of fragments; its unity comes from consciousness. Consciousness bestows wholeness to the person. Human beings are made of physical and psychological elements held together by consciousness, which gives an image of unity. These elements are constantly moving. The person’s psyche is shaped by the social interactions outside; yet the person’s consciousness, in resolving the conflict of fragmentation, provides a unified self. The concept of God, as an absolute “personality”, corresponds to a united self. God is the abstraction of our longing for unity. “Just as our own imperfect unity is borne mysteriously by the idea of the self, the true unity of universal being is crystallized in an ultimate self, the absolute personality” (Simmel, 1997 [1911b]: 52).

The promise of unity of religion counterbalances the fragmentation of modern individual identity. This a sense of unity involves interaction. Everything, Simmel states, is “in incessant motion” (Simmel, 1997 [1911b]: 54). This is because there is always a distinction within reality. There is a separation between the absolute and the world, just as much as within the self. The self is not subsumed within its contents, its thoughts, feelings, and decisions; it is “*distinct from* each item of content”; the self “*judges* every such object, accepts or rejects it, is master of it or not” (Simmel 1997 [1911b]: 55, emphasis in the original). This separation, the mind thinking itself, does not prevent it being unified (Simmel 1997 [1911b]: 58). The world as well as the self are constantly moving; yet there is a unity emerging from interactions. It would be tempting to leave Simmel’s analysis of self and religion at this concept of unity, but it would fail to include his later thought. In the next section, I outline Simmel’s *Lebensphilosophie* and construct religious authenticity by linking Simmel’s notion of self-transcendence with religiosity.



## Religiosity as self-transcendence

Towards the end of his life, Simmel re-conceptualised his neo-Kantian framework of Forms through a formulation of *Lebensphilosophie* (2010 [1918]). *Leben* (Life), here, is modelled partly on Heraclitus' continuous flow. However, Simmel does not abandon Kant; rather he integrates Forms with *Leben*. As argued by Levine (2012: 2), contrary to the traditional systematisation of Simmel's thought according to different periods: a Darwinian period, a Kantian period and a final Bergsonian stage of *Lebensphilosophie*, Simmel integrates Kant and Goethe, who remain his principal interlocutors throughout his life. Simmel re-works his understanding of Forms as essential part of the Life process. Forms are in opposition to Life, but are also essential to its process. From the never-ending flow of Life, Forms crystallise. Forms do not fossilise Life; rather, the process of Life is such that Forms are adapted and surpassed by new Forms. Simmel identifies two dimensions of Life: "more-Life" (*Mehr-Leben*), which is the fundamental dynamic movement of all life forms<sup>2</sup>, and "more-than-Life" (*Mehr-als-Leben*), which transcends the Life process to crystallise into Forms (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: 13-17).

*Mehr-Leben* refers to "the drive toward reproduction, common to all organic species" (Levine, 2012: 37), whilst *Mehr-als-Leben* is the creation of Forms that become autonomous, which include cultural forms. Forms give Life a shape. In the words of Donald Levine, they re-engage vital processes reshaping them and thus need to be understood as integral part of the Life process (Levine, 2012: 37). They are necessary for Life to concretise. When a Form is no longer an adequate vehicle for Life, there is a crisis that can lead to changes to that Form or create new Forms (Levine, 2012: 36). So, for instance, when a particular Form of religion becomes obsolete, a new Form emerges. Life and Forms

---

<sup>2</sup> Life forms can be human or animal.

are in dynamic relation. In *The View of Life* (2010 [1918]), as noted by Levine:

[Simmel] reversed his position dramatically. Instead of viewing the ongoing life process as threatened by the hypertrophy of objectified cultural forms, he found the ascendance of the idea of Life and the explosion of vital energies so relentless that cultural forms could no longer exert the kind of constraint that they had throughout history (Levine, 2010: xxii).

The totality of Life can never be constrained in a Form. The absolute is never reached. The Life process implies a constant overcoming. Simmel's burning concern for unity gives way to a dynamic process of becoming and overcoming. The quest for the absolute can be realised only through partial and individual content (Simmel, 1996 [1910]: 24). Simmel's philosophical principle is thus not unity, but self-transcendence (*Selbsttranszendenz*). In *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (1996 [1910]), Simmel stated that human beings, "as knowing beings", can transcend themselves by virtue of their capacity for interpretation and awareness of the limits of knowledge (Simmel, 1971 [1918]: 357-8). Human beings recognise the partiality of human knowledge. Knowing that "this one-sidedness" is a necessity of cognition places human beings above it (Simmel, 1971 [1918]: 358). Life is "this-side" of the boundary (*Grenze*), but it is also on the "other-side". So it is this human awareness that is self-transcendent. This "self-transcending consciousness" poses the self between the relative and the absolute (Simmel, 1971 [1918]: 364). It is by being aware of the relative and absolute, the particular and the universal, that human beings can transcend themselves. Transcendence, therefore, is immanent (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: 17). It is not located in a supernatural realm; rather it characterises the human condition.

[Human beings] do not simply stand within these boundaries, but by virtue of our awareness of them have passed beyond them [...] That we are cognizant of our knowing and our not-

knowing [...] this is the real infinity of vital movement on the level of intellect (Simmel, 1971 [1918]: 358).

By philosophising, one overcomes the finitude of one's consciousness. Philosophy offers a possibility of self-transcendence, as do art and religion. As Fitzi explains:

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

This conception has at its background the philosophical and artistic question of the relationship between absolute and particular. It is a search for truth, which is not necessarily a relationship with a transcendent divine, but the universal, the Kantian transcendental, but also Goethe's "authentic truth, true essence of reality, freed from any falsification" (Simmel 2008 [1906]: 23). According to Simmel, Kant's Absolute is a pure idea that cannot be seen or known, while Goethe seeks that "immediate sentiment of the essence of nature" (Simmel 2008 [1906]: 24). It is Goethe's notion of unity of being expressed in the multiplicity of forms that fascinates Simmel. The Absolute, or transcendent, or divine, is in nature as much as in the human soul. Podoksik suggests that Simmelian individuality needs to be reconciled with universality or, as he puts it, totality. For Podoksik, individuality and totality are reconciled through a "radicalization" of the individualism of distinctiveness (Podoksik, 2010: 139), which Simmel calls "qualitative individualism" to capture the concern for a distinctive individuality typical of the nineteenth century. In this reading the particular is submerged by the absolute. Similarly, Darmon and Frade argued that "the self-transcendence of life is so continuous

that form is constantly on the brink of being dissolved into flux. [...] the merging into the One is always ahead, as well as behind, and life a perpetual imbalance so as to preserve this overall encompassing equilibrium” (Darmon and Frade, 2012: 206). However, I argue that more than “equilibrium”, what is central to Simmel’s conception of the relationship between absolute and particular is the “conflict”, the tension that cannot be resolved. In Simmel’s writings, we might perceive at times a longing for an all-encompassing oneness. Yet Simmel does not seek a reconciliation of the particular with the universal, but a constant movement of self-transcendence, a becoming which captures opposing forces.

Like Michelangelo’s *non-finito* (unfinished), Simmel wants to retain the tension and perpetual overcoming of Form. In his essay on Michelangelo, Simmel wrote that the artist attained perfection and redemption of life in life itself, in moulding the absolute in finite form (2003 [1910]: 64). The overcoming of the dualism of body and mind, accomplished by Michelangelo in his statues, is not a placid perfection, but retains the conflict of opposites. The Form is never “finished”; it is temporary, fleeting, while Life is always moving and never Oneness. Simmel, therefore, is not seeking a peaceful and harmonious unity of consciousness for the individual, but a higher unity that does not dissolve the inner contradictions. “Being” thus reaches itself only in the infinite path of “becoming” (Simmel, 1996 [1910]: 59).

My proposal of interpreting the “sensitivity” of religiosity as a sensitivity to self-transcendence rests on Simmel’s concern with the “intellectual level” of experience. Simmel’s exploration of individual religiosity is akin to a philosophical search for knowledge. That is why religiosity is an attribute that is present in some people more than in others. The religious “soul”, to use Simmel’s words, like that of the artist and of the philosopher is attuned to self-transcendence. The artist, the philosopher, and the religious person seek an awareness of the human condition. They go beyond experiencing and understanding objective reality

to grasp the metaphysical dimension of life. Simmel's thought is therefore metaphysical. He was interested in the metaphysical dimension of art, philosophy, and religion, rather than the objective cultural products of art, philosophy, and religion. Simmel's self-transcendence makes his metaphysics not one of unity, but one of tension and overcoming. The person is in tension with social reality, or "facticity" to borrow a term from Sartre. Human beings do not go beyond "facticity"; rather they become aware of it by virtue of self-transcendence.

Much of Simmel's thought on religion frames it as a state of mind, a form of consciousness. Vandenberghe argues that Simmel, in a Kantian move, shifted from the transcendent to the transcendental. The "noumenon" is something experienced by consciousness and therefore no longer transcendent, but immanent (Vandenberghe, 2010: 7). In Vandenberghe's interpretation, the "immanent transcendent" is constituted by the person's consciousness. I only partly agree. I propose to go one step further by interpreting religiosity as a sensitivity to self-transcendence. I base my interpretation on Simmel's comment that religiosity is a "*life process*" (Simmel, 1997 [1912]: 209, emphasis in the original), which is required to transcend itself to acquire a Form. The taking of a Form is an objectification that is external to religion. Simmel writes that:

it [religion] suffers from the inability to shake off this otherness [...] because religiosity remains fused with *forms* of the earthly, rationalist, social-empirical material through which objective religion came into being, while still enduring the presence of random particles of its *matter* (Simmel, 1997 [1912]: 209, emphasis in the original).

Religion taking a Form becomes entrapped in social reality, although it retains its self-transcendent character. The shedding of old Forms and the taking up of new ones purifies religion, not in the sense of religion becoming more perfect or better, but more itself, "a more purely religious form" (Simmel, 1997 [1912]:

210). As McCole (2005: 15) explains, for Simmel, the rationalism of the modern age and the enlightened criticism of religion purify the subjective religious attitude of religion's contents, such as dogmas. Religion is purer when more subjective, when it allows the expression of the person's religious sentiment. In the following section, building on my interpretation of religiosity, as a sensitivity to self-transcendence, I argue that self-transcendence can be understood in proto-existentialist terms as being confronted and overcoming "facticity". I start by outlining Simmel's conflict of culture and interpreting it as posing the problem of facticity.

### **Religion's self-transcendence, modernity, and authenticity**

Simmel was particularly attuned to the subjectivism of the modern age. He recognised the benefits of modernity to individuals, who became much freer in urban life than they were in traditional societies (Levine, 1991: 105); yet the modern era was also a time of social fragmentation. In his essay on the "tragedy of culture" (Simmel, 1968 [1918]), Simmel argued that the person is overwhelmed by the seemingly endless production of cultural artefacts and objects. He distinguished between "objective culture" and "subjective culture". "Objective culture" is the culture that is independent of the individual and arises from the plurality of cultural artefacts produced in modern society. "Subjective culture" refers instead to the absorption of the cultural products by individuals, a process through which the individual develops culturally and morally. This "tragedy of culture", to which Simmel refers also as "conflict", lies in the inability of the person to absorb the ever increasing objective culture. The person's aspiration of expressing her own individuality is frustrated by her need to fit in society, which, in turn, stifles her individuality.

[The individual has a] sense of being surrounded by an innumerable number of cultural elements which are neither

meaningless to him nor, in the final analysis, meaningful. In their mass they depress him, since he is not capable of assimilating them all, nor can he simply reject them, since after all they do belong potentially within the sphere of his cultural development (Simmel, 1968 [1918]: 44).

This cultural gap is a result of the division of labour of the modern economy, which creates “objectified cultural forms [...] at a rate which exceeds the capacity of human subjects to absorb them” (Levine, 1991: 107). Simmel acknowledged that human consciousness had to be preoccupied with means in order for human beings to progress, to have the strength or interest to perform the immediate task without being crippled by the realisation of its ultimate insignificance (Simmel, 2004 [1907]: 231). In other words, human beings cannot simply contemplate the ultimate concerns of life (Simmel, 2004 [1907]: 232), but need to function within society; yet the frustration of “the purposes of life” leaves people “enslaved [...] in the interest of technics” (Simmel, 2004 [1907]: 232). This mismatch between social pressures and individuality drives the individual to a heightened subjectivism. Simmel wrote that:

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

Modernity allowed more individual autonomy and thus individualisation, but it also created a conflict between individuality and society. This concern for one’s individuality, for Simmel, was characteristic of the nineteenth century. Simmel distinguished between “quantitative individualism” and “qualitative individualism” (Simmel, 1950 [1908]: 81). “Qualitative individualism” is the individualism of universal singleness [*Einzelheit*], which identifies the universal ideal of

freedom and equality of the individual. This is the individualism of the eighteenth-century and reflects the Enlightenment's values of freedom and equality. "Qualitative individualism" is the individualism of uniqueness [*Einzigkeit*], which stressed the uniqueness of the individual as evidenced by the Romantic movement of the nineteenth-century. The value of the individual did not lie solely on being human, but on being distinctive. What mattered was that the individual "was this specific, irreplaceable, given individual" (Simmel, 1950 [1908]: 78).

The concern for an individual's "originality" (Simmel, 1968 [1918]: 19) was, for Simmel, the result of the fragmentation of modern society. Yet, the conflict of culture should not be taken simply as alienation, but as Simmel's dialectical mode of thinking (Levine, 1991: 109). It is from the tension between the individual and the social that individuality emerges. For Simmel, the individual is embedded in social relations and, yet, having an individuality of one's own. The individual seeks to overcome the constraints of social life whilst dwelling in it, a concept that will influence Martin Heidegger<sup>3</sup>. The theme of opposition between facticity and the individual's ability to transcend it, at least cognitively, is strong in Simmel's analysis of individual religiosity. To static forms of religion, he contraposed mystical religiosity.

Mystical religion is the answer to the conflict of culture. It is a turn inward in search of deeper meaning. Simmel's conception of religiosity counters the fragmentation of the modern "self" by reconciling the multiple aspects of the self that are played out in social relations. It provides a unified self-understanding, consciousness, a oneness that stands in contrast to the reality of a fragmented world. Religiosity, as afore-mentioned, is a form of consciousness; yet, as I propose, it is also self-transcendence and thus a way to overcome facticity, which is never fully realised. Religiosity is not transcendence separate from immanence, as it

---

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger's interest in Simmel's work is reported in Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*.



might have been in Christian theological tradition, but the constant process of going beyond facticity, the “becoming” of a person. My interpretation of Simmel in a proto-existentialist vein is supported by his attempt at understanding human beings as self-transcendent and religiosity as a process.

In *Ethik und Probleme der modernem Kultur* (2004 [1913]), Simmel reflected on the post-Enlightenment framing of the religious question as a question regarding its empirical reality. Accordingly, either the supernatural is real or faith is but a subjective fantasy (2004 [1913]: 44). Simmel opposed to this view a “third” option: faith itself may be something metaphysical. The transcendent lies in “the *process* of faith” (2004 [1913]: 44, emphasis in the original). It is being religious that is transcendent, metaphysical and objective (2004 [1913]: 45). Therefore, religiosity is being sensitive to the metaphysical dimension of life. The religious person is engaged in a constant effort to transcend facticity. In this struggle lies “authenticity”. Thus, authenticity is not merely the realisation of what is distinctive of the person, the individual uniqueness, rather it captures the person’s self-transcendence. Yet, there is a further step to take. Authenticity is, specifically, a moral “becoming”, as explored in the next section.

### **The ethics of authenticity in Simmel’s individual law**

I understand authenticity as the attempt at transcending facticity. Such transcendence is never realised fully, because both facticity and transcendence are constitutive of existence. The self cannot go beyond its embodied and social reality, but it can become aware of social reality and of itself. Authenticity is therefore always a process and never something attained. It is this awareness, the being between limits, that stirs the person to seek to transcend facticity. Authenticity is the process of gaining consciousness of one’s individuality as distinct from one’s social self, i.e. one’s social roles and social typification, and the constant movement to redefine oneself vis-à-vis social reality. The

authentic self thus emerges from, or better, is constructed out of this dynamic relation between self-transcendence and facticity. The empirical research on authenticity suggests that authenticity emerges out of a conflict between the ideal and the social, as evidenced by the experience of members of subcultures (Lewin and Williams, 2009) as well as Christian evangelicals (Montemaggi, 2017b). The reference to authenticity in the narratives of Christian evangelicals, as well as members of subcultures, often implies the pursuit of an ethical ideal.

The “individual law” (*individuelle Gesetz*) is Simmel’s attempt at theorising duty on the basis of a person’s individuality. Accordingly, the person’s sense of duty to act ethically comes from her very being. Ethical behaviour is thus the way for self-realisation of the person. Simmel’s ethics is grounded in individuality and the individual’s search for freedom from social conditioning. In opposition to Kant’s categorical imperative, Simmel argued that the person is not simply obligated by a general abstract law, but a command felt by and emerging from the individual. The ethical command is not what is customary in a society, which merely reflects facticity, nor is it an impersonal universalism, but an “ought” (*Sollen*) that is deeply felt by the person. As Levine puts it: “Duty still constitutes the formal structure of morality, as with Kant, but for Simmel now it consists of duties to pursuing the ever-emerging ideal of one’s authentic self” (Levine, 2012: 38).

The “ethical life” is thus conceived by Simmel “as the perfection of the individual” (Lee and Silver, 2012: 131). The moral self is self-transcendent. The moral self creates boundaries, but to avoid being suffocated by them, it also overcomes them (Joas, 2000: 77). The “ought” is not separate from the process of Life; rather it rests on becoming aware of social conditioning and of one’s duty. For Simmel, “the meaning of the moral law can lie only in addressing the whole person and demanding of him precisely those acts which are inherent in him as impulses of the Ought (*Sollensimpulse*) in a particular situation” (Joas, 2000:

82). As argued by Ferrara, life, as it ought to be, needs to be traced at the individual level; yet the “ought” is not determined solely by the individual (Ferrara, 1998: 65-66). Indeed, Ferrara stresses that Simmelian authenticity is no mere self-realisation.

At the same time Simmel wishes to distinguish his ethics of the individual law from what he understands as a “hedonistic ethics of self-realization.” Happiness – not even happiness understood as the fulfillment or realization of one’s personality – is not as such the ultimate end presupposed by the individual law (Ferrara, 1998: 68).

Simmel sought to avoid relativistic subjectivism by attempting to reconcile the universal moral law with individual subjectivity, conceiving individuality as the door for universalistic value. The “ought” has authority over the individual only if it “speaks” personally to the individual (Silver et al., 2007: 272). Morality, for Simmel, is apprehended

in the inner uniqueness or solitude in which it is experienced, then morality itself originates from the point where the person is alone with himself, and to which he finds his way back from the ‘broad way of sin’ – whose breadth signifies not merely its alluring ease, but also its accessibility for all (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: 115).

The “individual law” is Simmel’s attempt at making the “ought” dependent on the individual person: the person expresses herself in the act. Ethical conduct requires the whole person; it is not exhausted by the action; rather it is an expression of the self. The person is called to realise the “ought”. The “ought”, however, is not subjective, but objective, whether it is recognised as such or not by the individual (Simmel, 2008 [1896]: 37). Therefore, ethics does not lie in single acts; rather each act be understood as part of a whole of one’s life. Individuals live out, in their own values, universal norms (Vandenbergh 2000). For Simmel, “law can only stem from the life unity of the individual unfolding as obligation – or more precisely, the law

must be the instantaneous arrangement of it” (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: 124)

Simmel’s objectivity of the “ought” rests on the Nietzschean notion of the “eternal recurrence” of existence (Simmel, 1991 [1907]: 176). Recurrence instils in the person the obligation of living every instant as we would if we were living eternally. Therefore, acts are not judged in isolation, but as part of one’s entire life. Simmel, explaining Nietzsche, stated:

We are responsible for our conduct in a new way, or at least we understand our responsibility differently, if we know that no moment of our life is ever over once and for all, but that we and humanity must experience it innumerable times just as we shape it now (Simmel, 1991 [1907]: 171).

Simmel’s conception of the individual law sought to respond to the subjective turn that required the “ought” to speak to the individual whilst at the same time be in accordance with an objective moral law. However, Simmel’s authenticity presumes Nietzschean “nobility”. It is not an enterprise for the faint-hearted, but for a selected few. As such, it lacks generality. This need not be seen as moral elitism that precludes the masses from moral self-realisation. It can be understood as different degrees of moral “sensitivity”, just as much as religious sensitivity is, for Simmel, present in some more than others. Yet, as Vandenberghe noted, Simmel’s philosophy of life lacks a philosophy of the good life thus leaving his notion of individual law open to abuse (Vandenberghe, 2000). Whether Simmel’s concept of individual law is an adequate framework for moral reasoning today is beyond the remit of this article. The appeal of the individual law, in relation to authenticity, lies in its tension with facticity. The “ought” is in opposition to facticity (Ferrara, 1998: 65). The authenticity of the “individual law” rests on the individual’s self-transcendence. The self moves towards an ideal whilst remaining embedded in social relations. Authenticity is once again in the tension between the pull towards the ideal and

objective reality, the awareness of social conditioning and the person's embeddedness in society, transcendence and facticity.

The individual's "battle" against facticity echoes Simmel's essay "On the Salvation of the Soul" of 1903, Simmel interprets the Christian idea of salvation as imposing a duty on the person to make the most of her own talent (1997 [1903]: 34). It is this individualism and "battle of self-assertion against one's self in order to achieve salvation" that is most akin to the search for authenticity. For Simmel, every person has an ideal of themselves in tension with objective reality. He wrote that: "[T]he self's pure form, what it ought to be, is an ideal reality that pervades the imperfect reality of existence" (Simmel, 1997 [1903]: 30). The path towards that ideal comes through the discarding of – what we may call – facticity. "Everything outside the soul that has power over it must first be discarded" (Simmel, 1997 [1903]: 31). It is the transcendence of social forms what grants the person freedom. We are free "when our individual thoughts and decisions, our actions and our suffering alike, are an expression of our real self, undiverted by forces that do not form part of us" (Simmel, 1997 [1903]: 32). Yet the quest for freedom is a path specific to the individual self, not a general moral law.

Simmel takes the individualism of Christianity as a paradigm for the modern search for authenticity. It is in the individual dimension of religion, rather than in its social dimension, where authenticity emerges. Following my interpretation of religiosity as a sensitivity to self-transcendence, we can see religion as a path to authenticity. It is religion that, like the individual law, cannot be reduced to a specific content, such as propositional belief, but is lived in every moment. As he wrote, "If subjective religiosity were to be realized in an absolutely pure form [...] it would be in the process of life itself, in the way the religious person lives each hour of his life" (Simmel 1997 [1914]: 79). The religious life emphasises self-transcendence and is therefore a path to authenticity. The self is for its own sake, or, in the words of Sartre, it is *pour soi*.

## Conclusions

The article presented an account of Georg Simmel's thought on the social and cultural shifts of modernity in relation to individuality and made the case for interpreting religion as a path to authenticity. Authenticity arises from the pursuit of the individual's distinctive individuality, which Simmel regarded as a hallmark of the nineteenth century. The particularity of the individual is both a result of the modern value of individual autonomy and the reaction to a rapidly changing society, which is felt as fragmented. The more the individual is pressed to present multiple selves, at home, at work, at leisure, the more fragmented they feel. The more they need to comply with social norms and roles, the more they seek refuge in an "unspoiled" inner self. Authenticity is thus not only "being oneself", but the struggle to transcend facticity, the social conditioning and social roles that impede self-autonomy and self-expression.

Modern subjectivity has a radical impact on religion. Simmel feels religion needs to adapt to modern subjectivism and emphasise the inner experience. Simmel's notion of religiosity as a sensitivity taps into the emotional aspect of religion (Montemaggi 2017a). At first glance, Simmel seems concerned with the religious sentiment; yet his approach is always more philosophical than phenomenological. In examining the individual dimension of religion, Simmel focuses on religion's capacity for providing unity to the mind. Simmel's quest for "unity", to which religion gives expression, is not a mere search for meaning, but the response of religiosity to modernity's fragmentation of the self. The modern self is made of fragments searching for unattainable unity; religiosity is where the self is reconstituted.

Simmel's reflections on the unity of religion should not be understood as a form of theological pantheism; rather Simmel's use of religious terms needs to be taken as a metaphorical way of expressing metaphysical concepts. Consequently, religion, as a

Form, structures the experience a person has of reality. It is relational in the sense of connecting disparate elements of reality and thus making sense of it. Religion is like a schema, or a frame, that orders life. It is a form of consciousness that centres the modern individual. The totalising force of religiosity counters the fragmentation of modern individual identity and provides a unified self-understanding to the person. This unity of consciousness is, at least in part, a solution to the fragmentation of the modern self.

The article suggested we take a step further and interpret religiosity in the light of Simmel's philosophy of life, which he formulated towards the end of his life. Simmel's concern for unity gives way to becoming. Simmel grounds his thought on self-transcendence. Self-transcendence is the mind's ability to go beyond facticity. The person's realisation that the world is but "one side", allows one to transcend it by virtue of this very recognition. It is the philosophical-metaphysical endeavour that is at stake here. Simmel's "immanent transcendence" is an attempt at grappling with the universal and the particular, with Life, in the ontological sense, which takes a Form and then surpasses it. The constant movement of Life means that old Forms become obsolete and are discarded for new ones. This metaphysical understanding of reality is not limited to philosophy, but is present in art and religion.

Religion, Simmel argues, is more itself when it discards the old Form. I argue that this ought to be interpreted as religion being more "metaphysical", rather than transcendent, for it rests on the religious person's metaphysical sensitivity. Religiosity is thus a sensitivity to self-transcendence: the sense of being "this side" and the attempt at going beyond it. This interpretation does not reject the idea of religion as a form of consciousness that provides unity to the person, nor the latent religious sentiment that is present in some more than in others; it goes beyond these notions to make sense of Simmel's references to religion as a life process and to integrate it with his vitalistic philosophy. Religion,

as a life process, is a metaphysical avenue, which enables the person to sense self-transcendence. The transcendence of facticity is never attained, but the movement towards self-transcendence is always present.

Authenticity, for Simmel, was not limited to consciousness. It was not solely a philosophical acknowledgement of social conditioning. It called for the pursuit of ethical self-autonomy and self-realisation. In the “individual law”, Simmel attempted to ground ethical duty in individuality. He sought to reconcile the universal with the particular. The moral law needs to be in accordance with the individuality of the person. It is again in religion that we see an instance of this conception of authenticity. It is in the pursuit of an ideal self that the person battles herself, her “ego”, to realise a self that is not tainted by facticity. The “soul’s salvation” to which Simmel refers is the individual’s search for authenticity. By interpreting religiosity in connection with self-transcendence, we come to see another dimension of Simmel’s religion. The religious life is the pursuit of an authentic life, challenged by facticity and inspired by ethical ideals.

## Bibliography

- Ferrara A. (1998). *Reflective Authenticity. Rethinking the Project of Modernity*. London: Routledge.
- Fitzi G. (2012). “A ‘transformative’ view of society building: Simmel’s sociological epistemology and philosophical anthropology of complex societies”, in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(7-8), pp. 177-196.
- Gadamer H. G. [1960] (1972) *Verità e metodo*. Milano: Fabbri.
- Lee M., and D. Silver, (2012) “Simmel’s law of the individual and the ethics of the relational self”, in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(7/8), pp. 124-145.
- Levine D. N. (1991). “Simmel as educator: on individuality and modern culture”, in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, 8(3), pp. 99-117.



- Levine D. N. (2010). "Introduction", in: *The view of life. Four metaphysical essays with journal aphorisms*. Simmel, G. and D. N. Levine (ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago: ix-xxxii.
- Levine D. N. (2012). "Soziologie and Lebensanschauung: two approaches to synthesizing 'Kant' and 'Goethe' in Simmel's work", in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(7/8), pp. 26-52.
- Lewin P. and J. P. Williams (2009). "The Ideology and Practice of Authenticity in Punk Subculture", in: *Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society*. Vannini, P. and J. P. Williams (eds.). Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 65-82.
- Luckmann T. (1967) *The invisible religion*. New York: Macmillan.
- Montemaggi F.E.S. (2017a). "Belief, trust, and relationality. A Simmelian approach for the study of faith", in: *Religion*, 47(2), pp. 147-160.
- Montemaggi F.E.S. (2017b). "The authenticity of Christian evangelicals. Between individuality and obedience", in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 32(2), pp. 253-268.
- Oakes G. (1980). "Introduction", in: *Georg Simmel. Essays on interpretation in social science*. Oakes, G. (ed.). Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 3-94.
- Podoksisk E. (2010). "Georg Simmel: three forms of individualism and historical understanding", in: *New German Critique*, 37(1), pp. 119-145.
- Pyyhtinen O. (2010). *Simmel and 'the social'*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ruel M. [1982] (2002). "Christians as Believers", in: *Anthropology of Religion*. Lambek, M. (ed.). Malden, Mass: Blackwell, pp. 98-113.
- Silver D., M. Lee, and R. Moore, (2007). "The View of Life: a Simmelian reading of Simmel's 'testament'", in: *Simmel Studies*, 17(2) pp. 262-290.
- Simmel G. [1908] (1950). *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Wolff, K. (ed.). New York: The Free Press.
- Simmel G. [1898] 1955. "A contribution to the sociology of religion", in: *The American Journal of Sociology*, 60(6), pp. 1-18.

- Simmel G. [1918] (1968). "The conflict in modern culture", in *Georg Simmel. The conflict in modern culture and other essays*. Etzkorn, K. P. (ed.). New York: Teachers College Press, pp. 11-26.
- Simmel G. [1918] (1971) "The transcendent character of life", in: *Georg Simmel on individuality and social forms*. Levine, D. N. (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 353-374.
- Simmel G. [1910] (1996) *I problemi fondamentali della filosofia*. Andolfi, F. (ed.). Bari: Biblioteca Universale Laterza.
- Simmel G. [1903] (1997). "On the salvation of the soul", in: *Essays on religion*. Simmel G. & H. J. Helle (ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 29-35.
- Simmel G. [1904] (1997). "Religion and the contradictions of life", in: *Essays on religion*. Simmel G. & H. J. Helle (ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 36-44.
- Simmel G. [1911a] (1997). "The problem of religion today", in: *Essays on religion*. Simmel G. & H. J. Helle (ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 7-19.
- Simmel G. [1911b] (1997). "The personality of God", in: *Essays on religion*. Simmel G. & H. J. Helle (ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 45-62.
- Simmel G. [1912] (1997). "Religion", in: *Essays on religion*. Simmel G. & H. J. Helle (ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 137-214.
- Simmel G. [1914] (1997). "Rembrandt's religious art", in: *Essays on religion*. Simmel G. & H. J. Helle (ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 78-98.
- Simmel G. [1918] (1997). "The conflict of modern culture", in: *Essays on religion*. Simmel G. & H. J. Helle (ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 20-25.
- Simmel G. (1997) *Essays on religion*. Helle, H. J. (ed.). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Simmel G. [1910] (2003). *Michelangelo*. Lukács, G. (ed.). Milano: Abscondita.

- Simmel G. [1913] (2004). *L'etica e i problemi della cultura moderna*. Napoli: Guida.
- Simmel G. [1906] (2008). *Kant e Goethe. Una storia della moderna concezione del mondo*. Como: Ibis.
- Simmel G. [1896] (2008). "Friedrich Nietzsche. Un profilo filosofico-morale", in: *Friedrich Nietzsche. Filosofo morale*. Simmel, G. and Andolfi, F. (ed.) Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, La Ginestra, pp. 29-45.
- Simmel G. [1918] (2010). *The view of life. Four metaphysical essays with journal aphorisms*. Levine, D.N. (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vandenberghe F. (2010). "Immanent transcendence in Georg Simmel's sociology of religion", in: *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 10(1), pp. 5-32.
- Vandenberghe F. (2000). "La loi individuelle: une éthique nietzschéo-bergsonienne", in: *Simmel Studies*, 10(2), pp. 169-178.
- Vandenberghe F. (2001). *La sociologie de Georg Simmel*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Vannini P., and J.P. Williams, (2009). "Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society", in: *Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society*. Vannini, P. and J. P. Williams (eds.). Farnham: Ashgate: 1-18.