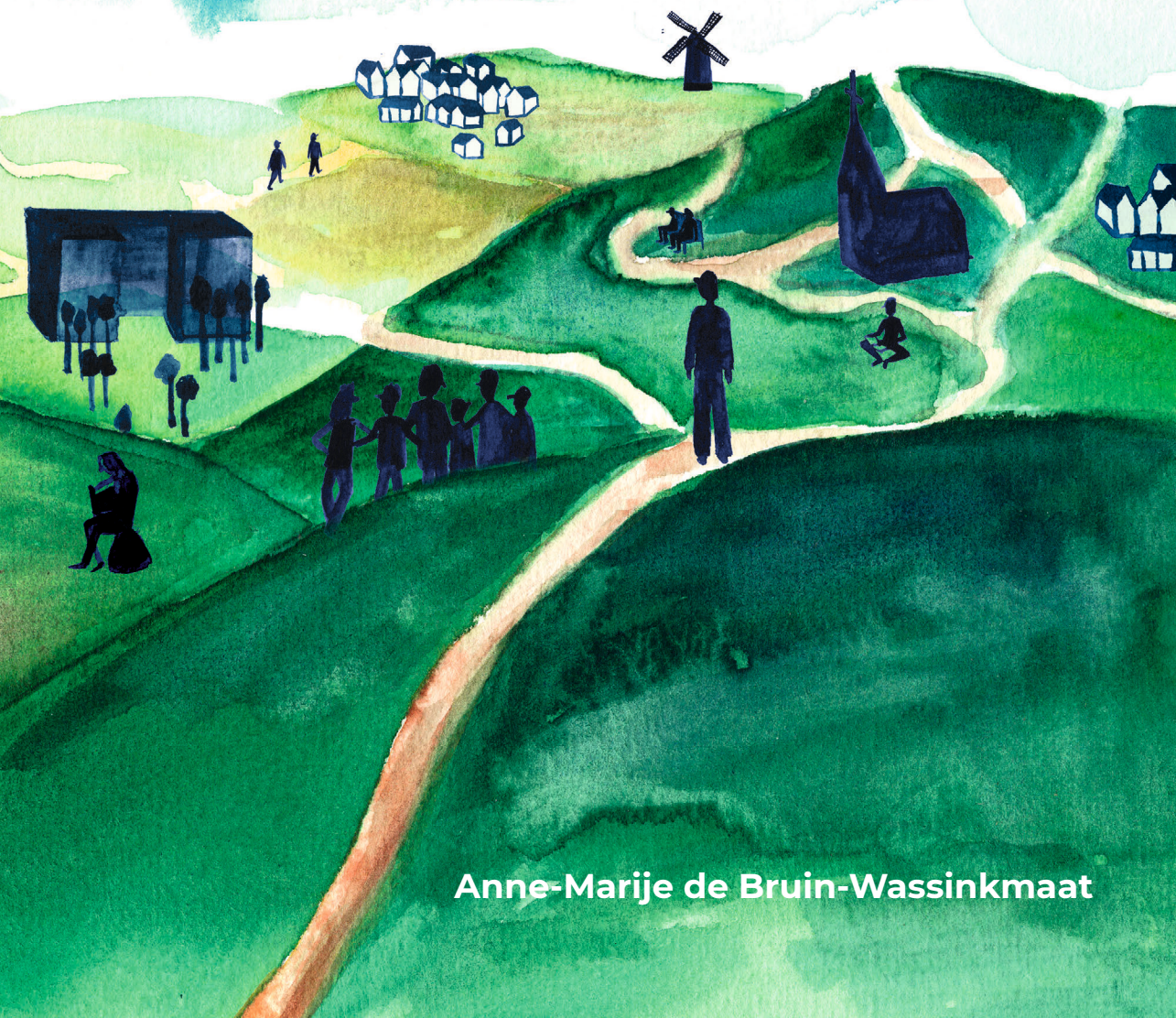
FINDING ONE'S OWN WAY

Exploring the religious identity development of emerging adults raised in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands



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EEN EIGEN WEG VINDEN

Een onderzoek naar de religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling van jongvolwassenen die in een reformatorisch opvoedingsmilieu in Nederland zijn opgegroeid

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Protestantse Theologische Universiteit te Amsterdam – Groningen,
op gezag van de rector, prof. dr. P. M. Wisse,
ingevolge het besluit van het college voor promoties
in het openbaar te verdedigen te Amsterdam
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geboren op 25 mei 1990 te Oene (gem. Epe)

Promotoren: Prof. dr. M. Barnard

Prof. dr. C. Bakker

Prof. dr. A. de Kock

Copromotor: Dr. E. Visser-Vogel

To Thomas, Jonne-mei, and Joshua

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1

Introduction

Setting the stage

Mathilda:

> Over time, you also increasingly, how should I say that precisely, I guess, your faith gets more depth. That first time, that first year there was just the joy and the full confidence, that you think: "hey, I now really believe in God." And that is not just a bit of appearance, but that's the depth.[1]

Richard:

> I then [during the secondary school years] felt that things were going too far. For example, friends who really made fun of it [the faith], so that I thought, "yes, this is going a bit too far or something." A bit slowly, I increasingly became less religious. . . . In the sixth grade, I really think, I was no longer religious.

Oliver:

> When I was eighteen, I actually wanted to quit, because I felt that, well, with the church, I don't need that anymore. And then I went along to the Jehovah's Witnesses. But then I didn't really say that is what it will be. I went along with that, and I thought it was better than the church, but I didn't know whether that [JW] would be it [for me]. In that year, isn't it, I really delved into it, so that I again realized: "yes, this is it."

These quotations from my interviews with strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults show the different directions in which the religious identity developmental path of young people[2] can lead. Although Mathilda became more assured about her faith, which deepened it and made her joyful, Richard increasingly experienced distance from the Christian faith, and Oliver committed himself to the Jehovah's Witnesses. All three grew up in strictly Reformed contexts, while at the same time they are citizens of

1 To increase the readability of the three quotations on this page, I slightly adjusted the verbatim transcribed text. In the remainder of the text in this dissertation, I use the verbatim quotations, except for the final quotation in Chapter 8.

2 I investigated a population of emerging adults aged 22–25 years old. However, in the interviews, the participants narrated about their religious identity development in the life phases of childhood, adolescence (the past), and emerging adulthood (the present). In this dissertation, I use the term *emerging adults* when I speak about the research population in general and when I discuss their current religious identity commitment. Likewise, I use the terms *young people* and *youth* in reflections on processes of religious identity development, both within the research population and in other studies on this topic. See chapters 2 and 8 for further (methodological) considerations concerning terminology.

the Dutch pluralist and secularized society. They, like other emerging adults brought up in strictly Reformed families, had a sheltered upbringing in which they and their families and friends were strongly oriented to their own strictly religious community, a community that embodies and transmits orthodox beliefs, practices, and expectations (Armet, 2009; Hemming, 2016). Nevertheless, they found their own way in what, in this dissertation, is called their religious identity development, for some resulting in commitments to the Christian faith and for some in commitments apart from faith.

Arnett (2015) maintains that "today's emerging adults are considerably less religious than their parents and grandparents, which indicates that the religious training that parents provide may fail to take root in the next generation" (p. 223). This statement about emerging adults in the United States points to a pattern in the research literature on the religiousness of emerging adults: that their religiousness declines or changes even though they are religiously raised. Generally, it is assumed that this decline or change in religiosity is related to the age phase of emerging adulthood. Smith and Snell (2009), building on the data of the Nata Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), for example, argue that

> the main job of emerging adults is to learn to stand on their own two feet, to become independent. The religion in which emerging adults were raised is connected with an earlier phase in their lives when they were dependent on their parents. . . . [L]earning to stand on one's own two feet means, among other things, getting some distance from one's family's faith and religious congregation. (p. 150)

Thus, as a natural consequence of growing older and increasing independence, emerging adults distance from the faith they were raised in. Characteristic of this increasing independence is that youth strive for agency in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015). This implies that young people want to make their own deliberate choices concerning religious beliefs, values, and practices. Questions that religiously raised emerging adults may have are: to which beliefs, values, and practices transmitted to me will I commit? And how could I, building on my religious socialization, shape my own set of beliefs, values, and practices? I propose that this agentic process goes hand in hand with and is strengthened by exposure to other views and perceptions from outside the religious contexts while young people grow older (Arnett, 2015). Moreover, with Perrin (2020), I argue that it applies to emerging adults that "with all the options, changes and pressures they face, the process of achieving a stable adult identity (be it religious or not) is a far more complex task than previous generations faced" (p. 152).

Considering these decreases, changes, and challenges in the religious identity development of emerging adults, it is relevant to investigate processes of religious identity development. Negru et al. (2014), who investigated the religious socialization of a Romanian emerging adult population, state that "little is known though about emerging adult religious development in cultural contexts outside of North American

cultural contexts" (p. 381). Likewise, little is known about religious identity development within strictly religiously raised youth populations (see Chapter 3). For these populations, making an independent religious identity commitment is challenging, especially in post-modern contexts. This is because they are confronted by expectations raised by strictly religious educators in their own community, and by processes of secularism and pluralism in society.

In this research project, I seek to understand the religious identity development of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. This specific population can be perceived as a minority group that has received scant attention in the research literature on (religious) identity development. The publications available are mainly non-academic. Nevertheless, strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults receive a lot of attention in the public debate. This means that a lot has been said about these emerging adults; however, their own voice is rarely raised. Thus, it is needed to gain more insights into this population and especially their religious identity development.

I focused my research on (a) the literature about strictly religious youth and their religious identity development (see Chapter 3), (b) religious identity commitments (see Chapter 4), (c) exploration processes (see Chapter 5), and (d) the role of contextual factors in religious identity development (see Chapter 6). This focus was prompted by the themes that I found in the studies included in my systematic literature review (see Chapter 3). An additional focus was motivated by a dominant theme that appeared in my data analysis: many participants felt that they were not good enough (see Chapter 7).

The central research question of the research project is: How can the religious identity development of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands be described and interpreted?

The following sub-questions guided my research project:

a) How do existing studies of strictly religious adolescents conceptualize and investigate their religious identity and religious identity development, and on what should future researchers focus to gain a better understanding of this population?
b) What are the religious identity commitments of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands?
c) How did strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands explore their religious identities, and how did they experience that exploration?
d) Which contextual factors were, according to strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands, influential on their religious identity development, and how do they value and characterize this influence?
e) How can feelings of not being good enough, which emerged in the life stories of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands, be explained in relation to their upbringing?

In investigating these questions, I take the perspectives of emerging adults into account, which means that I consider strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults themselves as the primary sources to enhance our understanding of their religious identity development. Moreover, it means that in this research project, I give those young people a voice, since there are all kinds of images of them, but to date we know little about them based on scientific, empirical research. I thus conducted life story interviews with such strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults, and in Chapter 2, I will elaborate on my research methodology in this regard. These emerging adults differ in current religious identification. Some identified as Christian and strictly Reformed, while others identified as non-strictly Reformed Christian. Also, some identified as non-Christian or non-religious. Such a diverse population might provide deep insights into experiences with growing up in a strictly religious environment and its implications for religious identity development.

Perceptions in Dutch society of growing up in strictly Reformed contexts

Strictly Reformeds in the Netherlands are commonly known because of stereotypes about "de zware gereformeerden" ("the ultra-Reformed") and people who are members of the "zwarte kousen-kerk" (a church with strict rules about appearance and clothing, in the Dutch language referred to as "black stocking churches"), stereotypes that are confirmed by literature and (social) media (van Lieburg, 2007). Several Dutch literary authors who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts (cf. the literary works of Franca Treur, Jan Siebelink, Liesbeth Labeur, Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, and Robert Haasnoot) share, in their books, their experiences with their upbringing, and they often seem to confirm the stereotypes.

Besides these insider-perspective books, voices in the media draw attention to growing up in strictly Reformed contexts, mostly to the potential implications of attending strictly Reformed schools. This is because, to outsiders, strictly Reformed schools seem to be the most concrete manifestation of a strictly Reformed upbringing and socialization. For example, in November 2020, a discussion developed in the media about the declarations of strictly Reformed secondary schools, which parents need to sign before their child may attend such a school. The criticism centered on the content of these declarations and especially implicit or explicit statements that reject a homosexual lifestyle. Many Dutch people, including politicians, expressed their often-critical opinion about these statements, and Twitter seemed to explode. The Dutch educational system, involving that religious or ideological schools have freedom of education and freedom of religion, yet also receive government funding, again became a topic of discussion. Likewise, in June 2017, a Dutch philosopher posted a blog on the online platform ThePostOnline about the dress code of a strictly Reformed secondary school (van den Berg, 2017). He described this school as a "refotaliban" ("strictly Reformed Taliban")

because the school board prescribed how to dress and disapproved, for example, of the use of too much makeup. According to the philosopher, the students of this school must submit to these rules under both pressures from parents and the guise of freedom of religion. These students, he asserts, need to have autonomy, and therefore they should be released from this strictly Reformed Taliban.

Despite these prominent criticisms of a strictly Reformed upbringing, some portrayals seem more nuanced. A first example is the documentary *Na de zomer* ("After the Summer") that was shown on Dutch television in February 2016. It portrayed six strictly Reformed young people in their final year of secondary school and their first years of higher education. One of these youngsters stated that the documentary presents a fair picture of strictly Reformed youth, a picture that had been missing for a long time. In the newspaper *Trouw*, this youngster said, "people seem to think that we are prohibited to do anything and that it is not fun to believe, but the documentary shows that faith helps me and gives guidance in life" (translated from Dutch; Scheele, 2016). Another example is the popular 2019 exhibition "Bij ons in de Biblebelt" ("Among us in the Bible Belt") in the Dutch museum Catharijneconvent (the national museum of Christianity in the Netherlands). This exhibition illustrated who the strictly Reformeds are, what their concerns are, and where their beliefs stem from. With photos, art, interviews, lectures, characteristic artifacts and writings, and videos, including contributions of strictly Reformeds and former or non-strictly Reformeds, visitors received unique insights into strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. Despite all the often-stereotypical portraits of strictly Reformeds and growing up in strictly Reformed contexts, this research project seeks to move beyond stereotypes by describing and interpreting, from an empirical research perspective, how youth develop their religious identity in such contexts.

Geographical, sociological, and doctrinal characteristics of strictly Reformeds

Approximately 500,000 people in the Netherlands are strictly Reformed, which is around 3 percent of the Dutch population, and as such, they are a minority group (Schnabel, 2020). However, this does not imply that they are invisible in Dutch society. Their geographical, sociological, and doctrinal characteristics make them a remarkable group. A geographical characteristic of strictly Reformeds is that they generally live in rural areas that stretch from the northeast to the southwest provinces, also including some urban areas (Snel, 2007). Since 1985, this belt has been known as the Dutch Bible Belt. The term Bible Belt is also used to refer to areas where orthodox Protestants live in Norway, Germany, and the United States who hold the Bible as a central authority in their lives, go to church, and have certain moral and political views (Kennedy, 2020; van Lieburg, 2020).

A sociological characteristic of strictly Reformeds is that they represent a subculture in which faith and daily life are intertwined: they have their own (mega) churches, newspaper, and religious, social and commercial organizations; their own schools, events, and holiday parks. They have their own internet filter and their own broadcaster, their own union (Reformatorisch Maatschappelijke Unie), and their own political party (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij) that propagates the strictly Reformed principles and values (Pons-de Wit, 2020b; Schnabel, 2020; Stoffels, 1995). According to Schnabel (2020), in strictly Reformed contexts, there is both "social control and mutual solidarity" (translated from Dutch; p. 42). In line with features of orthodox religious people in general, strictly Reformeds are highly committed to the church and other church members, and they attach great importance to the own tradition (van der Veer & Janse, 2016; Stoffels, 1995, 2008). Also, strictly Reformeds are known because they are concerned with appearances. For example, strictly Reformed schools require that girls and women wear dresses and skirts, and churches require girls and women to wear hats (Schnabel, 2020; van Lieburg, 2007). Also, they are known for their conservative views on topics such as modern media, vaccination, family, sexuality, and life and death (van der Veer & Janse, 2016). As a subculture within the Dutch society with specific beliefs, practices, and organizations, strictly Reformeds thus differ from the larger pluralistic and secularized society. They tend to orient to their own subculture, as society is generally viewed as a threat to orthodox beliefs and values (Stoffels, 2008; van de Lagemaat, 2011). This orientation to their own community has as a consequence that "the contact with people with opposing beliefs and practices is kept to a minimum" (Schnabel, 2020, p. 42).

A doctrinal characteristic of strictly Reformed Christians is that they focus on human depravity, personal conversion and faith experience, and the notion of sovereign grace as a gift from God to sinful men (Stoffels, 2008; Zwemer, 2001). Strictly Reformeds generally distinguish between believers who have been chosen by God and are true believers, and believers who need to be converted. They believe that God predestined believers before the foundation of the world, so only God decides, through His grace, whether someone gets saved, and thus many believers are uncertain about their salvation (Stoffels, 2008; van der Veer & Janse, 2016; Wisse, 2020; Zwemer, 2001). Although persons cannot secure their own salvation, they should use "means" such as church attendance, Bible study, and prayer, "to have a chance" (translated from Dutch; Wisse, 2020, p. 91) to belong among those who are real believers. What makes these strictly Reformed *experiential*[3] believers is that they focus on the experience of a believer that he or she may take part in God's mercy. Usually, this is a process that starts with an awareness of personal sin and not being a real believer and leads to a search for salvation through Jesus Christ and increasing assurance of faith (Wisse, 2020). According to van der Knijff (2019), John Bunyan's book *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1892, 1967) is, at least within the Reformed congregations in the Netherlands, used in many

3 In Dutch: *bevindelijk*.

sermons as an example of a spiritual road of experience. Other core doctrines of strictly Reformeds are the belief in life after death, the existence of heaven, hell, and the devil, and the belief that the Bible is the Word of God and the "ultimate and infallible source of authority in matters of life and faith" (Stoffels, 2001, p. 294).

These doctrines are represented by strictly Reformed churches, and according to van Eijnatten and van Lieburg (2005), the following churches are perceived as Bible Belt or strictly Reformed churches: Reformed Congregations (Gereformeerde Gemeenten), the Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland), the Restored Reformed Church (de Hersteld Hervormde Kerk), the Old Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands (de Oud Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland), the congregations of the Christian Reformed Churches (de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken) that are related to the foundation Bewaar het Pand ("guard what has been entrusted to you"[4]), the Reformed Association within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Bond binnen de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland), and some small congregations, including house churches.[5]

Although several strictly Reformeds would admit that they want to keep the strict beliefs and practices as they are—since they, after all, embody the strictly Reformed tradition—there seems to be what Schinkelshoek (2017) calls a "silent refolution" ("a reformed revolution") going on within strictly Reformed contexts. This is because strictly Reformeds increasingly adopt materialistic lifestyles and are less loyal to their own church. Likewise, modern media, insurance, contraception, and vaccinations are generally accepted, and a growing number of strictly Reformeds leave the church (Kleinjan, 2013; Janse, 2015; van der Veer & Janse, 2016). In the same line, Wisse (2020) maintains that although many strictly Reformeds conform to the beliefs and practices, an increasing number of highly educated young people cannot identify with the experience-oriented way of believing. They seek a practical way of believing and personal spirituality. Also, Wisse (2017) maintains that in strictly Reformed secondary schools, there is a growing internal heterogeneity or plurality because of diversity in the student and teacher population regarding the orthodox church congregation—more or less orthodox—to which they belong. Thus, despite the homogeneity suggested by the intertwinement of faith and daily life and the set of doctrines described above, it becomes increasingly clear that strictly Reformeds are becoming more diverse and that static understandings of this group as a homogenous whole need to be challenged. Thus, this group, and especially young people and their religious identity development, need to be more closely examined.

4 Cf. 1 Timothy 6, verse 20.

5 In Dutch: "thuislezers."

Why use strictly Reformed as a label?

In Dutch, strictly Reformeds are characterized as *reformatorisch* or *bevindelijk gereformeerd*. These typologies indicate the adherence of these Christians to the Dutch Reformed confession and their affiliation with the tradition of the *Nadere Reformatie*[6] (Hoekstra & Ipenburg, 2008; van Lieburg, 2007; Zwemer, 2001). These typologies also indicate that strictly Reformeds in the Netherlands emphasize the idea of *bevinding* (experience) involving "the individual concern for a permanent orientation toward the characteristics of true belief in one's person life" (van Lieburg, 2012, p. 176). However, for *bevinding* and *reformatorisch*, there are no appropriate definitions available in English that capture the Dutch interpretation (Stoffels, 1995; van Lieburg, 2007).

For several reasons, I have preferred to characterize the research population as strictly Reformed instead of *fundamentalist*, *orthodox*, *conscious*, *devoted*, or *conservative* Christian or *Protestant*. Concerning the term *fundamentalist*, I argue that this term is pejorative because it is associated with terror, violence, and radicalism. As such, I expected that strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults would not identify with such a term (Stoffels, 2001). Concerning the term *orthodox*, Visser-Vogel et al. (2012) state that the "term orthodoxy is traditionally related to the doctrine of a religion" (p. 113); however, for strictly Reformeds, their faith is not only apparent in doctrines or beliefs but also in practices, values, and experiences. Moreover, this term, as well as *conservative*, *conscious*, and *devoted*, could apply to various groups of Christians, like Evangelicals, and thus this term might be confusing. Similarly, *Protestant* is a broad term that may cover various denominations and religious groups.

In their theoretical framework for the study of the religious identity development of highly religious adolescents, Visser-Vogel et al. (2012) elaborated on their choice for the label *orthoprax*, a label that emphasizes that religion "is primarily manifested in the way they live out their lives in practice" (p. 114). In her dissertation, Visser-Vogel (2015) evaluated the label and maintains that because of the focus on practices, religious experiences were not covered in the investigation. In this research project, however, I aim to capture beliefs, practices, and experiences. As such, the label *orthoprax* does not fit the scope of my research.

In consultation with researchers into strictly Reformeds in the Netherlands, I have preferred the term *strictly* for several reasons. First, this is because this term inherently refers to my target population's strict adherence to the beliefs and practices that are rooted in the Bible and the Dutch Reformed confession.[7] Second, *strictly* refers to strict beliefs that are held about salvation by strictly Reformeds (Snel, 2007). Also, this term

6 Also named the Calvinist Second or Further Reformation. This "movement within Dutch Calvinism took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the influence of Scottish, English and, to a lesser degree, German Puritans and that strove to keep personal behaviour and experiences within the norms of religious doctrine" (van Belzen, 2008, p. 125).

7 The Dutch Reformed confession consists of three doctrinal standards, the so-called "three forms of unity": the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt.

accords with Stark and Finke's (2000) terminology: they describe six religious niches that differ in degree of adherence to their religion in the context of the United States. The niches are on a continuum from *ultraliberal* to *ultrastrict*, with the niches *liberal*, *moderate*, *conservative*, and *strict* in between. People in the *strict* niche "let their lives be fully guided by their religious convictions" (Stark & Finke, 2000, p. 212), and the authors refer to John Calvin as a representative of the strict niche. His writings are still important for the strictly Reformed theology (Paul, 2007). Ultrastrict people separate from the secular society, and their religious identity is often marked by their outward appearance, which generally does apply to strictly Reformeds. Since both the strict and ultrastrict niches seem to cover the research population, I chose *strictly* as an umbrella term. Last, the term *strictly* is commonly used in the international literature on Reformeds and their theology (cf. Bremer, 2015; Meyer, 2008). Thus, the characterization *strictly Reformed* makes my research more responsive to the international discourse on strict religious populations and religious identity development.

Religion, religious identity, and religious identity development

This research project focuses on religious identity development and thereby incorporates various concepts: *religion*, *religious identity*, and *religious identity development*, and my conceptualizations build, in line with other studies within strictly religious (raised) populations theory (Armet, 2009; Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014; Fisherman, 2004, 2011, 2016; Layton, Hardy, & Dollahite, 2012; Schachter, 2004; Schachter & Ventura, 2008; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012; Visser-Vogel et al., 2015), on the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966, 1980). The Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory can be applied to various identity domains, like occupation, family, and politics. However, for my research project, I apply the theoretical ideas to the domain of religion. Chapter 3 functions as my extended conceptual framework for religious identity (development), and thus, in the following subsections, I only elaborate on the key points of these concepts. In the Conclusion and Discussion sections, I will reflect on my conceptualizations and refine them (see Chapter 8). Since the concept of religion is not incorporated in Chapter 3, in the next subsection, I will discuss it in more detail.

Religion

According to Hemming and Madge (2012), religion needs to be considered before religious identity is discussed. However, religion is a rather complex concept to define because "when the definition is deployed, it does different things at different times and in different circumstances, and responds to different questions, needs, and pressures" (Asad, 2011, p. 39). In this regard, Nelson (2009) points to a shift in thinking about religion from a traditional perspective to a contemporary perspective.

From a traditional perspective, religion "was used to refer to all aspects of *the human relationship to the Divine* or **transcendent**—that which is greater than us" (Nelson, 2009, p. 3, italics and emphasis in original). Also, from a traditional perspective, religion is perceived as institutional and traditional, and as a belief system (Park et al., 2016). From a more contemporary perspective, however, religion is perceived as activities that entail beliefs and practices, and these are both transcendent and immanent (Nelson, 2009). In this research project, I will adopt this contemporary perspective to religion and consider religion as multidimensional, related to the individual, the context, and the transcendent. Likewise, the contemporary perspective considers that religion becomes apparent in beliefs, practices, and experiences. In my research population, I also included participants who identify as non-strictly Reformed, non-Christian, and non-religious. With the contemporary perspective to religion incorporated into my interview guidelines, I was able to assess the religious identification and commitments of participants who do not perceive themselves as religious in a more traditional sense. This perspective ties in with the five-dimensions theory of religion of Stark and Glock (1968) and the seven-dimensions theory of religion of Smart (1998), which both point to various dimensions of religion, such as a ritualistic and practical dimension, and an experiential and emotional dimension.

While the definitions of Stark and Glock (1968) and Smart (1998) are quite comprehensive, I chose to align with Hemming and Madge's (2012) more compact definition of religion that includes four aspects: "(1) affiliation and belonging; (2) behaviors and practices; (3) beliefs and values; and (4) religious and spiritual experiences" (p. 40). I do not use this definition as a "unitary definable concept" (Madge et al., 2014, p. 5), but I consider the four aspects dimensions that could—to a certain degree—be present or absent in the lives of the participants.

I consider religion as important for identity not only because it supports the integration of all various identity domains, such as gender, ethnicity, and vocation. Religion offers "a transcendent worldview that grounds moral beliefs and behavioral norms in an ideological world view that gives meaning and orients behavior" (Armet, 2009, p. 280; Erikson, 1968). This grounding, meaning-giving and behavior orientation are even more important in postmodern societies characterized by hybridity and resistance to commitments (Good & Willoughby, 2007). Regarding emerging adults with strictly Reformed upbringings, I supposed that religion would be rather determinant because they were usually immersed in religion from a young age.

Religious identity and religious identity development

In my conceptualization of religious identity and religious identity development, I endorse what I wrote in Chapter 3 as a result of my systematic literature review. In line with the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory perspective, I perceive *religious identity* as one of the various identity domains of an individual's identity. Following Chapter 3 and my conceptualization of religion, I perceive that religious identity comprises specific

content and conduct. With content, I mean the beliefs, values, and doctrines, and with conduct, I mean the behaviors, rituals, and religious practice.

My systematic literature review (Chapter 3) made clear that religious identity development is poorly conceptualized. Nevertheless, I defined identity development based on the studies included in this review, as an active and developmental process in which youth deal "with past and present identifications to create an identity for adulthood" (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019, p. 72; see Chapter 3). Identity development "is said to take center stage in adolescence and emerging adulthood" (McLean & Syed, 2016, p. 4) because the changes in this period incite youth to work on their identity. Taking an Eriksonian-Marcian perspective on religious identity development might imply that static identity statuses are identified by the presence or absence of exploration and commitment (Kunnen & Metz, 2015). However, I argue that *religious identity development* is not merely a developmental and ongoing process, but more a dynamic interchange of commitment-making and exploration processes (see Chapter 3). Thus, it is needed for the developmental process of religious identity development to be described and interpreted.

I further argue that religious identity development occurs in interaction with the socio-cultural context that shapes, scaffolds, stimulates, and possibly hinders individuals' religious identity construction (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Fisherman, 2004, 2011; Fivush, 2013; James et al., 2014; Schachter & Ventura, 2008; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012, 2015). In Chapter 3, I extensively elaborate on the role of the context in religious identity development, and in Chapter 6, I discuss which contextual factors influence the research population of emerging adults with a strictly Reformed upbringing in their religious identity development, and how this occurs.

Relevance

Academic relevance

Hemming (2016) and Young and Shipley (2015) point to a growing scholarly interest in youth religion and religious identity, which is evident in the increasing number of studies into the religious identity development of young people *in general* (Adams, 2014; Baltazar & Coffen, 2011; Bertram-Troost et al., 2006, 2009; Fisherman, 2016; Lee et al., 2006; Ramirez et al., 2014; Rissanen, 2014; Seol, 2010; Smith, 2017). However, my systematic literature review (see Chapter 3) showed that the research on the religious identity development of strictly religious (raised) youth is underdeveloped. Also, my review showed that the available studies on these populations are mainly concerned with Jewish and Muslim youth and were conducted in the United States and Israel.

Therefore, in the first place, this research project is relevant because it describes and interprets religious identity development from the perspective of a specific population of emerging adults: those who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a small country, and although its society is pluralist and secularized,

strictly religious groups have their own pillar in this society. Thus, the project provides an important opportunity to advance understanding of this population and their religious identity commitments, explorations, and perceptions of contextual influences, especially because this population has received scant attention in academic studies.

Second, Schweitzer (2014) points out that the research on youth and religion needs to be interdisciplinary to inform various disciplines. My research project borrows from and touches on various academic fields. The theoretical framework builds on my systematic literature review study and is rooted in the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory. This theory represents a developmental psychological approach in which identity development is perceived as an ongoing process, with commitment and exploration as the central processes (Kunnen & Metz, 2015). In applying the identity theory to the religious domain and in investigating religious identity commitment and exploration processes, the research project thus contributes to further theoretical and empirical reflections within this discipline (see chapters 2, 3, and 4). Also, it contributes to theory development in the field of developmental psychology by organizing and discussing the literature on religious identity development within strictly religious youth populations and by proposing conceptualizations of religious identity and religious identity development (see chapters 3 and 8). My empirical research might inform the fields of practical theology and religious education by describing and interpreting the lived religious practices of a population that can be conceived of as a minority or marginalized group in the Netherlands. As such, my findings on the religious identity development of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults shed light on parts of worldwide patterns regarding changes in youth religiosity (Alii, 2009; Jackson, 2016; Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014; Heimbrock, 2011; Perrin, 2020).

Last, it is challenging to get insights into processes of development, apart from employing longitudinal research methods. Therefore, researchers into (religious) identity development often conduct retrospective interviews. However, for participants in such interviews, it can be difficult to oversee a whole life, even in emerging adulthood, and to speak about personal and sensitive topics such as religion. By including visual tools in my retrospective life story interviews, this research project contributes to the further development of qualitative, empirical research methods for studies into religious identity development and strictly religious (raised) youth populations (see Chapter 8).

Societal relevance

First, as this research will offer insight in the religious identity development of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts, it provides an evidence-based and more realistic image of strictly Reformed-raised young people in the Netherlands. Considering the images present in society (see this chapter), I propose that such images need to be mirrored.

Second, the research project is meaningful to policymakers who are charged with topics like (civic) education, formation, and socialization in relation to youth who attend strictly religious and mono-religious schools. The research population grew up and lives

in a secularized and pluralist society, and in education, they need to be prepared for active citizenship that embraces the norms and values of this society. However, those societal norms and values generally contradict those of their own strictly Reformed tradition and community (van der Veer & Janse, 2016).

Third, educators in family, school, and church may feel that it is not a matter of cause that youth remain strictly Reformed as they grow into adulthood. Although strictly Reformeds tend to be internally oriented and defensive to developments outside their own context, young people cannot be detained to their own context, and inevitably, they are influenced by other ways of thinking and living that come from outside the strictly Reformed context as well as from the inside (Wisse, 2017). These influences challenge, aside from the youth themselves, educators in family, school, and church (van de Lagemaat, 2011; van der Veer & Janse, 2016). Educators may, for example, experience difficulties in guiding children and youngsters in their religious identity development and in preparing them for the position of a Christian citizen in society.

This research project informs both researchers and practitioners in the field of religious education about the experiences of my participants with their strictly Reformed upbringing. In particular, what matters in religious identity development, according to young people—considering positive and negative contextual influences (see chapters 4, 5, and 6)—is informative. In the same way, the findings of this research project provide new input for the curricula of theology and pedagogics departments at universities and teacher training colleges concerning the formation of young people in families, schools, and churches. Also, the findings provide input for activities of consultancy and advisory services that help educators in supporting children and young people in their religious identity development.

Outline of the dissertation

The following chapter, Chapter 2, contains the design of this research project, and chapters 3 to 7 contain articles that were published in, accepted by, or submitted to academic peer-reviewed journals and elaborate on the findings of my systematic literature review study (Chapter 3) and my qualitative empirical study (chapters 4–7).[8] For consistency reasons, in this dissertation, I chose to use the APA reference system,

8 The supervisors of the research project are co-authors of these articles, and they provided feedback on the content. To the whole research project, it applies that I, as the primary researcher, formulated and identified the scientific problem and established the theoretical framework. I developed the research questions and both the methodology of the systematic review study and the empirical, qualitative research. Also, I researched, prepared, and conducted the systematic review and the interviews, carried out the analyses, and made interpretations. All steps in these processes were discussed regularly with the co-authors (who are supervisors in this PhD project). They shared their evaluations and reflections, and if needed, the PhD student made adjustments and incorporated their input in further analyses and presentations of the results.

although the original articles were submitted or published with the reference system required by the journals.

Chapter 2 concerns the research design of my project. I discuss the methodology of my systematic literature review study and my empirical research. I elaborate on various aspects of qualitative research, such as the narrative approach, the procedures concerning the recruitment and selection of participants, the interview procedure, and reliability and validity.

Chapter 3 describes the findings of my systematic literature review on the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents. This chapter concerns 15 studies I was able to include in the review after the application of the selection criteria. It organizes and discusses the literature by presenting the general characteristics of these studies, such as population, methodology, and theoretical framework, and by presenting and discussing how religious identity and religious identity development are conceptualized. In addition, it describes three themes and concerns that emerged from these studies—contextual influence, exploration and commitment, and autonomy and choice—that point to directions for further research. Because of the relevance of these themes for the empirical study of religious identity development, I integrated these into my research questions addressed in chapters 4 to 6.

Chapter 4 concerns the current religious identity commitments of my participants. After defining what a religious identity commitment is, it presents what participants are committed to by means of four commitment types that appeared in my data. These commitment types—commitment to trusting God, commitment to self, commitment to a rational belief in God, and commitment to not knowing yet—are discussed in relation to participants' strictly Reformed upbringing.

In Chapter 5, I present the results of my investigation of past exploration processes in the life stories of the research population. I present and illustrate three forms of exploration: asking questions, exploring alternatives, and rebellious behavior. Also, I relate these forms to the participants' current religious identity commitment and describe patterns I observed.

Chapter 6 elaborates on my exploration of participants' perceptions of contextual influences in their religious identity development. It presents which contextual factors were considered influential in this process and elaborates on several characteristics of these factors that made participants perceive their influence as positive or negative. Also, I reflect on the theme of agency in relation to these characteristics.

In Chapter 7, I elaborate on a dominant theme that emerged in the life stories I analyzed for answering the research questions addressed in chapters 4 to 6: that almost all participants felt or feel not good enough for God or believers within strictly Reformed contexts. I present and illustrate how this theme is related to participants' strictly Reformed upbringing and discuss the impact of such feelings on participants' religious identity development.

I end this dissertation in Chapter 8 by answering my research questions and discussing the research methodology and findings. Finally, I reflect on my position as a researcher, and I make recommendations for future research.

2

Research design

Methodology of the systematic literature review study—research stage 1

This research project involved a systematic literature review study and an empirical study. In this first section, I elaborate on the first research stage of my systematic literature review study. In this stage, I tried to identify conceptualizations and investigations of religious identity development within strictly religious youth populations. The findings of the review determined my conceptualizations of religious identity, religious identity development, commitment, and exploration (see Chapter 1). In addition, they determined the directions of my empirical study and especially the topics of my interview guidelines (see below). In the next section, I elaborate on the second research stage. In this empirical research stage, I tried to identify processes of commitment-making, exploration, and contextual influences in the stories of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults. The empirical study provided input for reflections on the initial conceptualizations, resulting in a revisiting of these in Chapter 8.

I conducted a systematic literature review to explore my first research question about how studies into the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents conceptualize and investigate this phenomenon. With this review, I was able to synthesize the existing literature, identify knowledge gaps, and discuss the implications of the results for further research, especially my own research project (Booth, 2012). I defined keywords, systematically searched with these keywords in four databases, and then excluded studies on the basis of my inclusion criteria. My analysis was aimed at identifying the conceptualizations of religious identity and religious identity development. Also, the analysis aimed at identifying recurrent themes that would be meaningful for the study and the understanding of religious identity development within strictly religious populations. As such, my systematic literature review study informed the research design: on a more abstract level, by providing the themes that are addressed in the interview guidelines, but on a more detailed level, by offering input for concrete interview questions. In Chapter 3, I present my systematic literature review study and provide a full description of the study's methodology.

Methodology of the empirical research—research stage 2

In this subsection, I elaborate on the methodology of my empirical research. Chapters 4 to 7 all concern my empirical research study, and in these chapters I left out the qualitative method subsections that were included in the original articles, except for the analysis subsection. This is because my analysis strategy slightly differed per article, although I adopted the same methodology for all articles, such as the interview guidelines, procedures, and sample.

My research project aimed at gaining insights into the religious identity development of emerging adults raised in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. To achieve

this aim, I consider strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults as the primary sources to enhance the understanding of their religious identity development. For several reasons, I adopted a qualitative research method to pursue this aim. First, qualitative research methods allow for rich and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation, resulting in deepened understandings (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). This is in line with Côté (2006), who argues that "manifestations of identity at the level of subjective experience and interactional discourse are especially emergent and transitory and should be studied as such with the appropriate (in-depth, qualitative) methods" (p. 10). In the same line, Hemming (2016) states that many studies in religion and youth adopted quantitative methods, like surveys, and by measuring religion overlooked the complexity and depth of the phenomenon. Statistics, for example, only make clear what has changed in identity development, but not how this process of change took place (Josselson & Flum, 2015). Second, qualitative methods facilitate the understanding of the perspective of participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Loveland (2016), it is important for the identification of religious identity commitments to "let individuals subjectively self-identify rather than sorting participants independently of their own sense of self" (Loveland, 2016, p. 284). Last, a qualitative research method is appropriate for topics or samples that have received scant scholarly attention, as applies to my research population (Creswell, 2013).

I chose a specific qualitative research approach: a narrative life story approach, based on the work of McAdams (1988, 2005, 2008). Alisat and Pratt (2012) characterize this approach as follows:

> McAdams (1993, 2008) theorized that, beginning in late adolescence, people understand and represent their sense of identity through the construction of personal life narratives. These stories provide their lives with a sense of identity, unity, and purpose. Studying these rich constructions provides insights into personal interpretations of experiences that are not accessible through questionnaire measures alone. Since development is a lifelong process (Erikson, 1956), autobiographical narratives are constantly changing and are key to a dynamic understanding of the whole person. (Alisat & Pratt, 2012, pp. 31–32)

As the quote illustrates, religious identity development is a narrative process, and thus, by investigating life stories, I was able to access religious identity commitments, explorations, and participants' perceptions of contextual influences. Storytelling involves that people reflect on past experiences, interpret these experiences in relation to the present and future, and integrate these reflections and interpretations into a meaningful life story (Atkinson, 1998, 2012; Habermas & Köber, 2015; McAdams, 2008; Straub & Arnold, 2008). According to Ammerman (2003), it is thus needed for the study of religious identity "to listen for stories in all their dynamic complexity, situating them in the multiple relational and institutional contexts in which contemporary people live their

lives" (p. 224). The added value of the narrative approach is that it gives voice to people who are often marginalized (Bruce, 2008; Crain, 2007; Dreyer, 2014; Ganzevoort, 2012, 2014; Osmer, 2008). I observed that the voice of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands is seldom heard in academia and the public, and as such, this approach suits the research population.

In line with Visser-Vogel (2015), in my research project I studied the content of the life story narratives to generate in-depth understandings of religious identity development. The project did not apply narrative analysis, which would imply that I studied the form, structures, and intentions of narratives (cf. McLean et al., 2020; Pasupathi et al., 2020).

Sample

I chose to investigate a population of emerging adults for several reasons. First, emerging adulthood—the phase from age 18 until the late twenties—is characterized by identity exploration and instability (Arnett, 2015), and it is thus a crucial phase in religious identity development. In line with this, Negru et al. (2014) maintain, referring to Barry et al. (2010), that "emerging adulthood brings forward active questioning of the individual's positioning toward the divinity, one's role in the world, and a search for existential meaning" (p. 381). Also, due to life choices and events concerning jobs and relationships, these individuals are not yet in the more stable phase of adulthood, although these life choices and events influence their religious identity development (Roehlkepartain et al., 2011).

Second, considering my narrative approach, there are additional reasons to select an emerging adult population, since people need to have the cognitive abilities to develop coherent life stories. As cognitive abilities develop during adolescence, I supposed that emerging adults would be able to structure experiences in chronological order and to summarize and interpret experiences; and to be aware of causal relations (Habermas & Kober, 2015). Third, emerging adults have more memories than younger people because of the number of life events they have experienced (McAdams, 2011). Thus, I supposed that by selecting participants in their mid-twenties, between 22 and 25 years old, it was likely that they would be able to narrate their religious identity development.

My research project builds on Visser-Vogel's (2015) study on the religious identity development of orthoprax Muslim adolescents, in which ten participants were included in the sample. As more data would generate more insights into the religious identity development of strictly religious-raised emerging adults, and those with a strictly Reformed upbringing, in this research project I extended the sample to 18 participants in the age range of 22 to 25. Although this sample size limits generalizability, it is consistent with other qualitative studies on youth and religiosity (Capitano & Naudé, 2020; Chaudhury & Miller, 2007; Good & Willoughby, 2007; Hadad & Schachter, 2011; Hopkins et al., 2010; Smith, 2017). The sample size also allowed me to immerse myself in data and to gather rich data instead of data that would represent the whole population

of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Gray, 2014; Patton, 2002; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2015).

Recruitment and selection of participants

I sought participants who had a strictly Reformed upbringing and decided to recruit former students of strictly Reformed secondary schools in the Netherlands. Those schools, situated in both urban and more rural areas, have in common that they have an admission policy: staff, students, and their parents should support the objectives and accounting principles of the school and be involved in one of the strictly Reformed churches in the Netherlands (Rijke, 2017). This admission policy thus guaranteed that potential participants were raised in strictly Reformed *contexts*. With *contexts*, I mean upbringing in a broad sense, involving that youth grew up in a strictly Reformed environment, went to strictly Reformed churches, joined religious organizations, and were educated in the strictly Reformed tradition, beliefs, and practices.

Although the admission policy entails that the population of these schools' students is quite homogeneous, it seems that, from an insider's perspective, there are subtle differences between the schools. Since those differences, among other things, might be related to the area in which a school is located, I decided to recruit former students of both a strictly Reformed school located in an urban, pluralist area and a strictly Reformed school located in a rural, more mono-religious area. I acknowledge that these characterizations are fluid and not recognized or known as such; however, I tried to compose a varied population, and thus I took the subtle differences between schools into account.

First, I selected two strictly Reformed secondary schools whose principals I contacted to ask for assistance in approaching former students of the schools. The initial contact with those principals was by telephone, though I already knew them from my work as an educational advisor. I introduced the research project and discussed how they could approach former students. After this phone call, I sent a formal letter to the school board to make my request official. The school principals discussed the request with their board colleagues, and the principals of both schools granted the request.

Second, I developed an online questionnaire with SurveyMonkey, a tool that was selected for privacy and safety reasons, since it is frequently used in scientific research. The questionnaire contained ten questions to highlight the characteristics of the potential participants (see Appendix A for the questionnaire). These characteristics would facilitate the purposive sampling of 18 participants with as much variation as possible. Each question had to be answered before the questionnaire could be submitted.

Third, I composed a letter addressed to the former students, which contained information about the research and a web link to the questionnaire so that recipients could click on it if they were interested in participating. I ensured that the link was not easy to identify or find in a search engine, which, however, did not preclude people from forwarding the questionnaire link to other people. Because of the type of questions, I

supposed this would not be a problem since useless responses could easily be filtered out. Also, I composed a reminder that could be sent two weeks after the initial letter and a set of instructions for the schools' administrative assistants, who would send the email. This instruction document included a table with information about the number and type of students who needed to be approached (Appendix B for the table for the recruitment of former students). In consultation with other qualitative researchers, I decided to approach a large number of former students. This was because it was expected that many would not respond to my call for participation, and I hoped to select a varied sample of participants. I asked the administrative assistants to select the first 25 students from a former student list in a certain senior[9] year and of a certain education level.[10] Part of the arrangement with the schools was that I did not know which former students were invited to participate in the study. Hereby, the privacy of potential participants was ensured.

One of the schools (School A) responded to the letter and the instructions with a statement that there were no email addresses available, although they had the email addresses of former students' parents. I, therefore, decided to adjust the letter and send it to the parents of former students in a certain senior year and of a certain education level. The letter was sent to 50 parents instead of the 25 former students, since the students were approached indirectly (see Appendix C). The other school (School B) withdrew from approaching former students because of privacy restrictions. They offered an alternative option: to put a call for participation in their news bulletin. However, only parents of current students would be approached with this option, and consequently, their children would not fit the age criterion. I, therefore, did not accept their offer, and I decided to approach a principal in my network as an educational advisor. He agreed to approach former students, and again, a letter was sent to 25 former students in a certain senior year and of a certain education level.

On March 7, 2018, 148 questionnaire replies were received, of which 93 responses were viable. The remaining 55 responses could not be used because the former students did not meet the age criterion or had indicated that I was not allowed to approach them for participation in the project. The responses I received after March 7, 2018 were not taken into account.

Next, I collected all the viable responses and observed that different participant profiles emerged from the responses. These profiles were rooted in the claims that participants made about their religiosity. There appeared to be two firm participant profiles, both at different ends of a spectrum: (1) Christian and still strictly Reformed, and (2) non-Christian and non-strictly Reformed. There was also a third, more fluid participant profile, which fitted in between the two other profiles: (3) participants who were Christian but not strictly Reformed, and participants who did not yet know whether they were Christian or not. From each school, I selected three participants

9 To guarantee that participants would fit the age criterion.

10 To guarantee the variation in education level.

per profile, thereby taking the variation in social-geographical context into account. I aimed for as much variation as possible in the sample and thus considered variations in participants' gender, age, and level of education. This variation would generate "two kinds of findings: (1) high-quality, detailed descriptions of each case, which are useful for documenting uniqueness, and (2) important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having merged out of heterogeneity" (Patton, 2002, p. 235). Finally, I emailed the selected participants and informed them that I would like to interview them and that I would like to discuss the details of participation in a personal phone call. In this call, I explained the research project and the interview procedures, and I made an appointment for the first interview.

To recruit two of my participants, I used the snowball sampling technique. This was because only a few emerging adults responded that they identified themselves as non-Christian and non-strictly Reformed (the second profile), and most of these were men. Likewise, a participant who fit the third profile declined to respond after the first phone call. To recruit new participants, I asked the already selected participants in an email whether they knew someone who fit the second or third participant profile and the other sampling criteria (Patton, 2002). This yielded no potential participants. In the interviews, however, two participants referred to someone they knew who fit one of the profiles. These selected participants asked the persons they knew whether they would be interested in participating. These persons agreed, and I approached them, following the same procedure as with the other participants. They responded to the questions of the questionnaire by email because they had not filled out the online questionnaire.

I am aware that the snowball sampling technique could be more biased because participants could be influenced by the fact that someone they knew also participated in the project. Also, they might recognize each other's stories. However, I believe that these concerns are—at least partially—resolved because I published my findings in articles, and thus, I do not present the complete stories of the participants. Also, I anonymized all participants' real names. All this reduces the likelihood that the participants would recognize each other's stories. Moreover, the concerns I referred to are inherent in this type of sampling because it assumes that participants are related to or know each other, and both the initial participants and the participants recruited with snowball sampling understood these implications and agreed to participate anyway. See Table 1 for the pseudonyms[11] and characteristics of the participants.

11 The names of all participants are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Pseudonyms and characteristics of the participants

Name	Gender	Age	Level of secondary education	Main occupation	Self-identification	Participant profile
Simon	M	23	Prevocational secondary education (VMBO) and secondary vocational education (MBO)	Working	Christian, strictly Reformed	1
Oliver	M	23	Prevocational secondary education (VMBO) and secondary vocational education (MBO)	Working	Christian, not strictly Reformed	3
Evelyne	F	23	Senior general secondary education (HAVO) and higher professional education (HBO)	Working	Non-Christian, not strictly Reformed	2
Robert	M	23	Senior general secondary education (HAVO) and university education (WO)	Studying	Non-Christian, not strictly Reformed	2
Adrian	M	23	Senior general secondary education (HAVO) and higher professional education (HBO)	Studying	Non-Christian, not strictly Reformed	2
Felix	M	24	Senior general secondary education (HAVO) and higher professional education (HBO)	Working	Christian, strictly Reformed	1
Emily	F	24	Prevocational secondary education (VMBO) and higher professional education (HBO)	Studying	Christian, strictly Reformed	1
Lois	F	24	Senior general secondary education (HAVO) and higher professional education (HBO)	Working	Christian, not strictly Reformed	3
Rachel	F	24	Pre-university education (VWO) and university education (WO)	Working	Christian, strictly Reformed	1
Tobias	M	24	Pre-university education (VWO) and university education (WO)	Studying	Non-Christian, not strictly Reformed	2
Mathilda	F	25	Senior general secondary education (HAVO) and higher professional education (HBO)	Working	Christian, strictly Reformed	1

Table 1 continued

Name	Gender	Age	Level of secondary education	Main occupation	Self-identification	Participant profile
Jonathan	M	25	Pre-university education (VWO) and higher professional education (HBO)	Working	Christian, strictly Reformed	1
Norah	F	25	Prevocational secondary education (VMBO) and secondary vocational education (MBO)	Working	Christian, not strictly Reformed	3
Susanna	F	25	Prevocational secondary education (VMBO) and secondary vocational education (MBO)	Working	Christian, not strictly Reformed	3
Christoph	M	25	Pre-university education (VWO) and university education (WO)	Studying	Don't know yet, not strictly Reformed	3
Lauren	F	25	Pre-university education (VWO) and university education (WO)	Working	Don't know yet, not strictly Reformed	3
Richard	M	25	Pre-university education (VWO) and university education (WO)	Working	Non-Christian, not strictly Reformed	2
Julia	F	25	Prevocational secondary education (VMBO) and secondary vocational education (MBO)	Working	Non-Christian, not strictly Reformed	2

Interviewing procedure

I prepared for interviewing by doing interview training and by conducting four pilot interviews to pre-test the interview guidelines and to become familiar with interviewing techniques. At these participants' initiative, the pilot interviews took place in their own homes. This appeared to be an appropriate place, as both participants referred to items in their houses several times. Also, the way the rooms were decorated informed me about the participants. In line with this, Collins-Mayo and Rankin (2010) suggest that interviewing young people in their own space helps in "reducing the impact of people overhearing personal information and the scope for negative peer pressure" (p. 197). For these reasons, I decided to inform my 18 participants that I preferred to interview them at their homes, provided that this place would be quiet and comfortable for the participant. I conducted two interviews with each participant: Interview 1 focused on participants' current religious identity commitments, and Interview 2, a retrospective life story interview, focused on their religious identity development throughout their lives.

The interviews were conducted between March 2018 and February 2019, and each participant received 50 euros for their participation in both interviews. The participants were interviewed in two tranches. This allowed me to put all my focus on the stories of nine participants per tranche instead of the stories of all participants at the same time. Also, this approach helped me to remain involved with these nine participants, ensuring there was a short period between interviews 1 and 2. In the phone calls I had with each participant before the first interview, I asked the nine participants of the second interview tranche whether they were willing and able to wait for this tranche. I decided to interview the oldest participants in the first tranche because it could be the case that in the second tranche, they would not fit the age criterion anymore. In the first tranche, I interviewed a group of nine participants twice between April and July 2018. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim afterward, partly by the researcher and partly by external transcribers who signed a confidentiality agreement. During the interview, I took notes about the interviewee and the interview context and content. I made a report based on these notes. This report was a useful tool for reflection, as Waterman (2015b) states that

> identity interviewers have the opportunity to probe for inconsistencies and have other information as well (e.g., body language, tone of voice, verbal gestures) that may suggest that the story conveyed by an interviewee is different from the words that are spoken or from the way in which the person actually functions. (p. 346)

Such 'other information' is important, as interviewees might create and maintain, in storytelling, an image of themselves. The report of each interview included preliminary analytical thoughts, for example, prominent themes or patterns I observed during interviewing, which provided input for my analysis and for the second interview with the participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the second tranche, between December 2018

and March 2019,[12] I conducted both interviews with the remaining nine participants, and again I made reports to facilitate initial analysis. In three cases, when I forgot a certain question or wanted to elaborate on a response in the second interview, I made an appointment for a telephone call or sent an email. I treated the written responses to my emails and the recorded and transcribed phone calls as research data.

The average length of the interviews was approximately three hours, resulting in approximately 110 hours of interview material as a source for the data analysis.

Instruments: Interview guidelines

In the in-depth interviews, semi-structured interview guidelines were used, involving open questions and key questions. The open questions were included as story-eliciting questions, and the key questions were included to address the research questions. On the one hand, this made my guidelines flexible so that I was able to respond to participants' answers and stories. On the other hand, it was ensured that all participants were asked the same questions and that the data for answering the research questions were gathered. In line with my Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory perspective and my narrative approach to religious identity development, I developed my interview guidelines along the lines of the guidelines of Visser-Vogel (2015). This is because they appeared "very useful in investigating the religious identity (development) of orthoprax Muslim adolescents" (Visser-Vogel, 2015, p. 140). These guidelines, in turn, were built on the guidelines of the Identity Status Interview (ISI; Marcia et al., 1993) and the life story interview protocol Faith, Politics, and the Life Story (The Foley Center for the Study of Lives, 2005). The ISI is a semi-structured interview guideline aimed at gaining insight into several domains of identity development, including religion. The ISI is regularly evaluated by researchers in the field of identity development. One criticism is that in the analysis of ISI data, researchers are often focused on assigning identity statuses to participants. However, contrary to Visser-Vogel (2015), in this research project, I do not aim to assign statuses but to describe the processes involved with religious identity development. Moreover, the ISI seems to comply with my developmental and in-depth approach to religious identity development and accompanying aspects such as commitments, explorations, and contextual influences. This is because, according to Kroger and Marcia (2011), it asks "participants in some depth how they came to their present commitments or lack thereof; what their past influences had been; as well as how and why they had changed from whom they had been in childhood" (p. 34). Furthermore, the ISI is an appropriate measure to gain rich data, especially concerning topics that are understudied, and contrary to more static questionnaires, the ISI takes the context into account (Crocetti & Meeus, 2015; Josselson & Flum, 2015). The interview protocol Faith, Politics, and the Life Story addresses an interviewee's life story, religious and political beliefs, and practices, thereby acknowledging that in storytelling, these, among commitment, explorations, and contextual influences, are revealed. Although

12 Due to the maternity leave of the researcher, the two tranches were not in immediate succession.

subjectivity is inherent in life story accounts, implying that accounts are provided at a certain moment in a certain context, I propose that they address valuable insights and perspectives (Schweitzer, 2014).

The content and form of the interview guidelines

Regarding the content of the interview, I took into consideration Visser-Vogel's (2015) suggestions for the improvement of the interview guidelines and techniques. I added questions about stability and change in religious identity development to deepen my understanding of participants' development over their life course. In addition, I added questions about how people in the participants' context perceived their religious identity commitment and development. Second, I worked on Chapter 3 while developing the interview guidelines. My systematic literature review study (see Chapter 3) revealed that identity salience, the importance of the religious identity domain considering other identity domains, is a relevant construct in studying the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents. I, therefore, based on this study and the studies of Armet (2009) and Wimberley (1989), added questions on the centrality of religion in the participants' lives to the guidelines. Third, my review study also revealed that autonomy and choice are perceived as crucial to healthy religious identity development, and therefore I added questions that address participants' autonomy and autonomy support in religious identity development (Armet, 2009; Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008). Fourth, I added more specific questions concerning commitment and exploration—for example, to what and because of what participants are committed and whether participants demonstrated explorative behavior (Visser-Vogel, 2015). Fifth, I observed that the aspect of religious experiences and emotions was not prominent in Visser-Vogel's guidelines, although it was included in Atkinson's (1998) life story interview. Considering my conceptualization of religion, I added questions to address this aspect. Lastly, I closely reviewed the guidelines and adapted them for the research population and research questions, and according to the latest developments in Eriksonian-Marcian theories and narrative studies on (religious) identity development (see Appendix D for the interview guidelines). This was because my research differs in the population and years in which the empirical data collection takes place compared to Visser-Vogel's (2015) study.

Regarding the form of the interview, I expanded Visser-Vogel's (2015) methodology by including visual methods. Those visual methods help elicit participants' stories and support them in their reflections on their experiences (Bagnoli, 2009; Hatten et al., 2013). I study a topic that might be considered sensitive. In such interviews, visual methods are especially helpful because, as Bagnoli (2009) puts it,

> focusing on the visual level allows people to go beyond a verbal mode of thinking, and this may help include wider dimensions of experience, which one would perhaps neglect otherwise. A creative task may encourage thinking in non-standard ways, avoiding the clichés and "ready-made"

> answers which could be easily replied. In this way, an arts-based method or graphic elicitation tool may encourage a holistic narration of self, and also help overcoming silences, including those aspects of one's life that might for some reason be sensitive and difficult to be related in words. (pp. 565–566)

Also, visual methods might help to "transcend religious language" (Dunlop & Richter, 2010, p. 210) or socially desirable answers, both of which are potential pitfalls for my participants, as they were raised in the strictly Reformed interpretation with accompanying language, and they might want to uphold a certain strictly Reformed image about themselves. Moreover, as Dunlop and Richter (2010) argue, visual methods are appropriate in addressing young people's perspectives because they are immersed in a world that is full of images. Finally, the use of visual methods may change the role of a participant in an interview. When interviewees may choose their own pictures or draw their own timeline, this reduces the power of the interviewer and thereby empowers the participant to share his or her story (Hatten et al., 2013; Mustafa, 2014; Robinson, 2002; Sheridan et al., 2011). Hemming and Madge (2012) argue that in religious identity studies, "there is still room for further development" (p. 47) concerning methods that engage youth in the research process. Therefore, by applying visual methods, I not only hoped to contribute to this further development; I also hoped to fulfill my aim to approach my research topic from the participants' perspectives by providing them more agency in constructing their stories (Hatten et al., 2013).

While the use of visual methods is developing, visual methods are already frequently applied in studies into identity (Chao, 2014; Cooper, 2017; Croghan et al., 2008; Hanghøj et al., 2016; Hatten et al., 2013; Noland, 2006; Ziller & Lewis, 1981), youth religiosity (Dollinger, 2001; Dunlop, 2008; Mustafa, 2014; Pearmain, 2007), and people's narratives (Adriansen, 2012; Bagnoli, 2009; Bennett, 2014; Patterson et al., 2012; Robinson, 2002; Sheridan et al., 2011). Dunlop and Richter (2010) argue that, for example, "photographic images can operate on a subconscious level to elicit responses about meaning, identity and spirituality" (p. 209). This underlines that visual methods are very appropriate to my study of participants' narrative accounts of their religious identity development. I, therefore, used auto-photography and timelining in my interviews.

For Interview 1—about participants' current religious identity commitment—I asked them to email me beforehand eight photos that represented who they were. I told the participants that they could select photos of anything they found representative of how they perceived themselves; however, I emphasized that the quality of the photo would not be taken into account. After receiving the email with the photos, the email was deleted, and the photos were stored in a safe directory. I printed the images and provided them to the participants at the beginning of the interview. Then, I asked the participants to tell about their current religious identity commitment with the help of their self-chosen photos (see Appendix D).

At the beginning of Interview 2, about participants' religious identity development, I asked them to draw a timeline of their lives and write down the most important events

and moments in their religious identity development (see Appendix D). Then, I asked the participants to tell their life stories in the interview with the help of the timeline. In this way, the timeline could function as an "aide-memoire" (Sheridan et al., 2011, p. 554) and as "a valuable tool for reflection" (p. 564). I emphasized that the outlook of the timeline did not matter and that they could complement the timeline during storytelling. My use of the timeline method is in line with (a) my developmental approach to religious identity and (b) the life-cycle perspective that I found in Atkinson's (1998) life story interview and the life story approach of McAdams (2005, 2008). Atkinson (1998) maintains that "the more we know about what was going on around the time of our birth, the more we will know about who we have become" (p. 43). This indicates that following the life cycle of participants—starting with the time of birth and with the help of the timeline—would give us more insight into both their religious identity and their religious identity development. In contrast to the transcripts of the interviews, the photos and timelines were not objects of analysis because they were intended to elicit and facilitate storytelling (Mustafa, 2014). Also, the photos and timelines were too confidential to ensure participants' anonymity with publication. Nevertheless, I reflected on the photos and timelines in the reports, and when I analyzed interview fragments in which the participants referred to these, I sometimes looked at the photos and timelines to provide context for the fragments.

Improvement of the interview guidelines

I revised and reviewed my interview guidelines in several rounds. First, I discussed my guidelines with the supervisors of the project, and I also consulted a colleague who has methodological expertise in the field of practical theology. Second, I practiced with some of the main questions of both interviews in the interview training, and I tested the guidelines in a pre-interview with a colleague. Based on these discussions and evaluations, I refined the questions. The structure and the topics remained the same. Lastly, I tested the interview guidelines in four pilot interviews (interviews 1 and 2) with two participants who fit my selection criteria: one participant fit into the "Christian and still strictly Reformed" profile and the other participant into the "non-Christian and non-strictly Reformed" profile.

Based on the pilot interviews, I adjusted the interview guidelines in three ways. First, regarding the main questions, the pilot interviews made clear that participants were inclined to elaborate on general identity development aspects instead of aspects that related to their religious identity development. This is something Visser-Vogel (2015) points to, and I suppose it is understandable for several reasons. Emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts were immersed in religion from a young age, so religion influenced their whole lives. Thus, it might be difficult to differentiate general identity aspects from religious identity commitment aspects (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Fisherman, 2011, 2016; Markstrom-Adams et al., 1994; and see Chapter 3). Also, I expected that participants who fit the "non-Christian and non-strictly Reformed" profile would be more inclined to refer to general identity aspects because they had left

the faith. Notwithstanding these possible reasons for the direction in which participants responded to the main questions, I adjusted the main questions so they were focused on religious identity development.

In case participants still answered by referring to general identity aspects, I included follow-up questions in the interview guideline about how a certain answer is related to being a Christian/non-Christian or to their strictly Reformed education. Second, the pilot interviews made clear that participants, in response to the questions about who or what influenced them in their religious identity development, only mentioned one or two persons and no other contextual factors that influenced them. I inferred that this limited response indicated that the question was too comprehensive, and the participants did not know what to think about. Therefore, I decided to develop association cards with, on each card, a contextual factor that might have influenced their religious identity development. The list of contextual factors was based on the studies of Fisherman (2011), Hemming and Madge (2012), Layton et al. (2011), and Visser-Vogel (2015). The idea behind the association cards was that when the initial questions would generate a limited response, I could offer the cards to elicit stories about contextual factors. Third, in the pilot interview, I tested the use of photos and asked participants to choose 10 photos; however, both participants chose eight or nine photos. Because the photos appeared to be very useful in eliciting stories, I decided to continue this in the other interviews, although I reduced the number of photos to eight.

Analysis

All sub-questions were thematically analyzed with ATLAS.ti software and in line with the phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). My narrative approach, however, involved that I study the content of the life story narratives to identify patterns across the stories of the participants (Patterson et al., 2012). This was because, in my research project, I investigated an understudied population, and as such, the project is explorative in nature. To gain first and deep insights into the religious identity development processes of this population, I considered it important to analyze each participant's individual story in the context of the stories of other participants.

It is noteworthy that I successively analyzed for the specific topic of the research questions: first for commitments, second for explorations, and then for contextual influences (see chapters 4–6). After an intense reading of the transcripts, I open-coded all the text segments that concerned the specific topic. Also, I coded for other themes regarding participants' religious identity development and upbringing that potentially could be relevant for the understanding of this topic—for example, experiences with this upbringing. In this way, I tried to be as open as possible to what would emerge from the data. The second phase in my analysis was that I reviewed the extensive list with descriptive codes, which was a result of my open-coding phase. I merged these codes into more abstract categories that indicated the deeper meaning behind the codes, and I made subcodes that were more precise. In the third phase, I turned back to the topic of my investigation and further analyzed the specific codes in relation to

the other codes that appeared in the open-coding phase. I thereby developed network views in which I linked codes and looked for patterns in the data. In chapters 4 to 7, I elaborate on my analysis methodology for each sub-question. The topic of Chapter 7, feelings of being not good enough in the life stories of my participants, appeared as a striking and dominant theme in my open-coding phases. Therefore, for this chapter, my analytical strategy slightly differs.

Trustworthiness

In the following subsections, I evaluate the trustworthiness of my qualitative study into religious identity development, following the five criteria of Lincoln and Guba: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity. Often, reliability and validity are perceived as important criteria for judging quality in research. However, with Lincoln and Guba (1985), Nowell et al., (2017), and Tracy (2020), I endorse that these criteria as such are not appropriate for assessing the quality of qualitative research. This is because the criteria reflect a positivist research paradigm, implying that there is a "true and empirical reality" (Tracy, 2020, p. 266) that can be measured, and as such, reliability and validity are more appropriate for quantitative research. I investigated the subjective, socially constructed realities and life story accounts of emerging adults, and thus trustworthiness criteria suit my research project better.

Credibility "establishes whether the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants' original data and is a correct interpretation of the participants' original views" (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). In my research project, I increased credibility through peer examination. This meant that I shared my research activities, interview guidelines, codes, analyses, reflections, and interpretations with the supervisors of the project and co-researchers from various research groups[13] to receive feedback and reach inter-coder consensus (Cornish et al., 2014; Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Likewise, peer debriefing of the articles was provided by the supervisors, academic experts, and the double-blind review process of the international journals to which I submitted the articles. In addition, I increased credibility by applying theoretical triangulation, which entails that I used several "theoretical perspectives" (Flick, 2015, p. 12) to religious identity development, and I developed my guidelines based on these perspectives and existing guidelines.

Transferability concerns "the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other respondents" (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). I provided thick descriptions so that readers can determine whether the findings apply to other contexts and populations. This means that I present in this dissertation (including the original articles) detailed accounts of the contexts in which the strictly Reformed-raised population grew up, the sample (size, strategy, and criteria), interview context, demographic participant information (see Table 1 this

13 From the PThU, the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion, Driestar Christian University for Applied Sciences, and at (international) conferences.

chapter), interview procedures and guidelines, and changes in my research design. Also, I increased transferability by taking a sample with as much variation as possible. Due to this variation, the results could be representative of the whole population in terms of content instead of sample size and might be applied to other situations (Maso & Smaling, 2004; Verhoeven, 2011).

Dependability and confirmability concern the transparency in describing the research process, including how a researcher reaches interpretations of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). In my research project, I investigated participants' perspectives and sense-making of experiences, and in this process, I tried to be as transparent as possible in what I did and how I did it. First, I kept a logbook in which I captured my experiences, choices, and reflections in the research process. These were discussed with the supervisors of the project, and I incorporated some of them into the methodology sections of my articles, the Introduction section, and the Conclusion and Discussion sections (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; see chapters 1 and 8). Second, I audio-recorded the interviews and transcribed them verbatim, so that they would be "open to further inspection by both researchers and readers" (Silverman, 2013, p. 298). Third, for data analysis, I used the computer program ATLAS.ti, in which my coding and analysis steps were recorded and, as with the audio recordings and transcripts, these are open for inspection. I twice consulted an expert on this program, with whom I discussed my way of working and first analyses.

Reflexivity involves that a researcher critically reflects on his or her own position, biases, and relationship to the participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). During the research process, I made reflexive notes, and in Chapter 8, I extensively elaborate on my position as a researcher in the research project.

Data management

The anonymized data will be archived through the safe-storage service DarkStor for at least the legally required 10 years. Because the data contain privacy-sensitive information, they will not be shared for reuse by other researchers.

3

Being young and strictly religious: a review of the literature on the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents

This chapter was previously published as de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. (2019) in *Identity. An International Journal of Theory and Research*, *19*(1), 62–79.

Introduction

In the context of radicalization, terrorist attacks, and the renewal of the plea for a reduced role of religion in society, especially in education, strictly religious adolescents have become the subject of media attention, prompting their inclusion in public and social discourse. Muslim fanatic converts are often those involved in radicalization, as opposed to Muslims raised in strictly religious environments, and even though there are differences among strictly religious Muslims, Jews, and Christians, it seems that public and social discourse is asking whether it is good or healthy for the development of strictly religious youngsters' religious identities for them to grow up in mono-religious contexts that advocate orthodox beliefs and practices (Donnelly, 2017; Kashti, 2017; van den Berg, 2017; van Gool, 2017). Beliefs and practices, such as the rejection of abortion practices, defensive attitudes toward other religions and cultures, specific dress rules, and refusal of medical treatment, conflict with commonly held values of tolerance, individuality, and personal autonomy (Boyatzis et al., 2006). Therefore, these beliefs and practices are sometimes viewed as dangerous, alienating, discriminating, indoctrinating, and nonscientific.

Orthodox beliefs and practices are usually reinforced by the community-centered and sheltered context in which these adolescents grow up because they embody demands and expectations from family, school, church, and religious organizations (Armet, 2009; Hemming, 2016). Many strictly religious adolescents are immersed in highly religious contexts from a young age, and therefore, such contexts have a significant influence on their religious identity development (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Fisherman, 2016; Peek, 2005). In addition, the larger pluralist and often secularized societies they are surrounded by influence their identity development. Through (social) media and encounters with people who hold different world views, these adolescents are confronted with other ways of thinking and living (Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008). They may, therefore, face a tension between preserving traditions and making religious commitments on one hand and dealing with modern ideas and lifestyles on the other (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Schachter, 2004; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012; Visser-Vogel et al., 2015).

Erikson (1968) conceived the construction of a stable identity as the central developmental task of adolescence; it entails integrating and configuring childhood identifications into new identity structures (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012; Schachter, 2004). Religion is considered highly relevant for identity development as it offers "a system of ideas that provides a convincing world image" (Erikson, 1968, p. 31) and makes dedicated claims and commitments an essential part of this process. According to Petts and Desmond (2016), "studying religion during these developmental stages is important, as individuals undergo a number of transitions including increased independence as well as physical and emotional changes" (p. 241). For strictly religious adolescents, these transitions occur within the dynamics of their own mono-religious context and the plural society that could challenge their religious identity development.

There is little understanding of how strictly religious adolescents develop their religious identities, and therefore it is difficult to come to unambiguous conclusions. While empirical research has been carried out on the religious identity development of adolescents in general, few studies have investigated strictly religious adolescents. Furthermore, it seems that the available studies of these populations are diffuse because they hold different theories on religious identity development. Also, in most of the cases, these studies lack a clear conceptualization of religious identity development. Moreover, an overview of the current state of research regarding religious identity development of these adolescents is also missing.

One purpose of this article is to organize and discuss the extant literature on the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents with regard to the conceptualization of 'religious identity' and 'religious identity development' and the measurement of religious identity development as a phenomenon. Another purpose is to provide direction for future research into this phenomenon and population. To these ends, we conducted a literature review addressing the question: How do existing studies of strictly religious adolescents conceptualize and investigate their religious identity and religious identity development, and on what should future researchers focus to gain a better understanding of this population?

Method

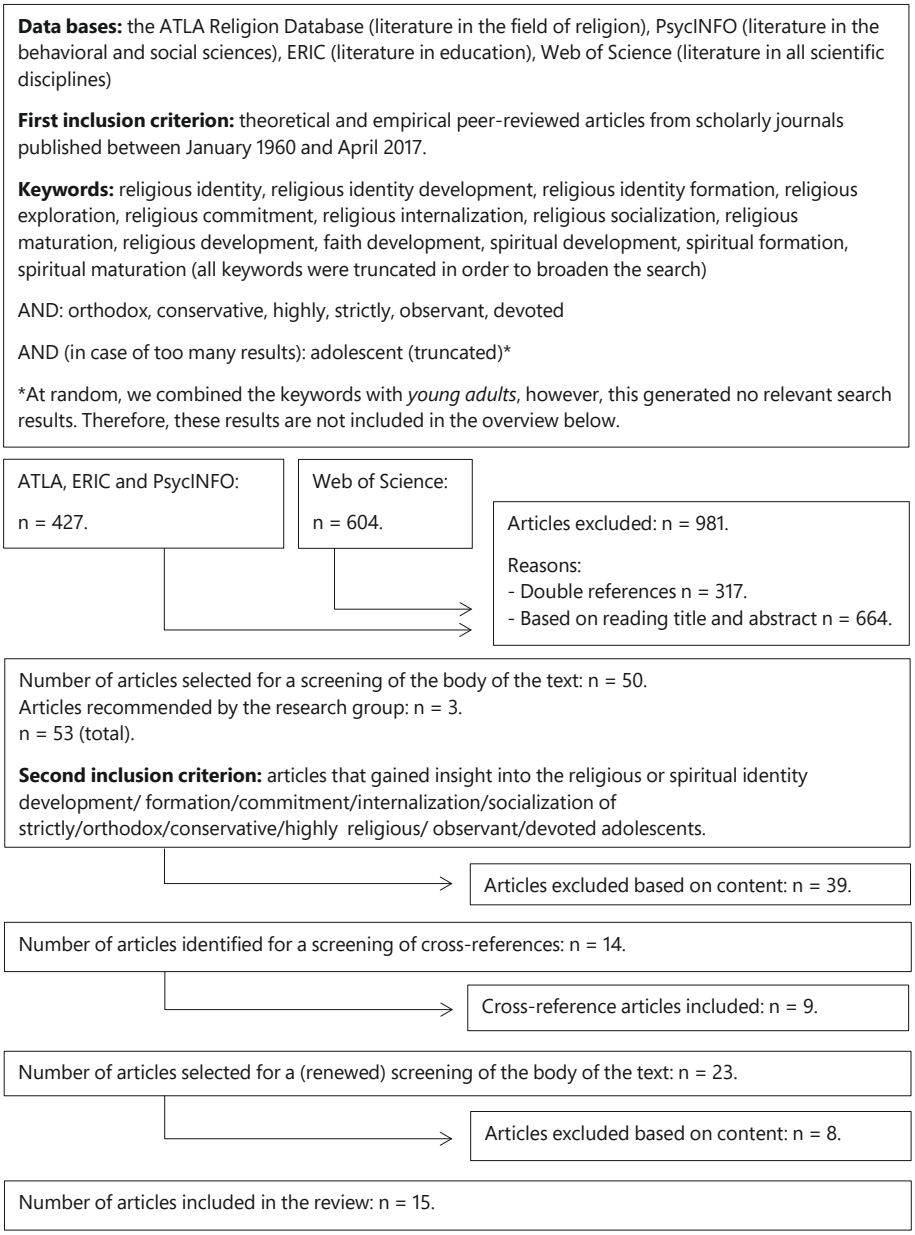
A literature review was conducted by the first author to organize the empirical and theoretical outcomes of studies on the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents, and to identify recurrent themes. The search strategy, analysis, and outcomes were discussed with the other researchers including the coauthors, researchers from the Department of Practical Theology of the Protestant Theological University in Amsterdam, and researchers from other departments and universities whom the first author met at conferences and research meetings.

Search strategy

The search for this literature review was conducted using the following databases: the ATLA Religion Database (literature in the field of religion), PsycINFO (literature in the behavioral and social sciences), ERIC (literature in education), and Web of Science (literature in all scientific disciplines). These databases were selected because they include different fields of study from which the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents has been researched. The search terms 'religious,' 'identity,' and 'development' as well as their synonyms and closely related words were used. These terms were derived from literature pertaining to the religious identity development of adolescents in general. During the search process, other researchers were consulted about the keywords, and keywords were added or adjusted. Because of the anticipation of limited search results as well as studies from different disciplines,

the range of keywords was broadly defined (Figure 1). To focus the search, the keywords were combined with Boolean operators. The first inclusion criterion was theoretical and empirical peer-reviewed articles from scholarly journals published between January 1960 and April 2017 (see Figure 1 for the exact description of the search strategy).

Figure 1. Description of search strategy



The peer-reviewed publications from the search were screened by reading the title and abstract, and double-reference articles were excluded. If this screening did not provide sufficient information, the article was selected for a screening of the body of the text. The first findings were discussed with the coauthors who gave feedback on the keywords and findings, and three articles were recommended that were not generated by the search strategy but that could be relevant to the review. Subsequently, the body of the texts of 53 articles was screened, and publications were excluded based on the second inclusion criterion, articles that gained insights into the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents. A list of 14 relevant articles was composed, and they were cross-referenced for other relevant articles. This resulted in a new list of 23 articles, which were reread and to which the second inclusion criterion was reapplied. However, some articles presented doubt because they could not easily be identified as studies addressing religious identity development, for example, because they studied identity development rather than religious identity development within a strictly religious population or because it was not so obvious that they had studied a strictly religious population. For these reasons, these dubious cases were discussed with the coauthors and 15 core publications were selected for the review (see Figure 1). The sample of 15 articles is theoretical in nature because the concern was to identify the most appropriate studies and not a sufficient number of studies (Booth, 2012).

Data analysis

An overview of the characteristics of the studies was conducted (see Table 2). The analysis of the studies initially attempted to assess religious identity and religious development by focusing on how it was defined in the selected studies. During the analysis, it became clear that this focus narrowed the view on the phenomenon for two reasons: Many of the included studies did not provide a definition and the terminology used for religious identity and religious identity development varied. Some studies did not explicitly refer to religious identity and religious identity development (see Table 2). Consequently, the analysis was broadened to focus on recurrent themes that appeared meaningful for describing religious identity and religious identity development in relation to strictly religious adolescents.

Results

Characteristics of the included studies

The analysis revealed that the 15 studies varied in terms of method, population, context, and theoretical framework. Table 2 provides a detailed overview of the characteristics of the included studies. The analysis also revealed two categories of literature: (1) studies rooted in an Eriksonian-Marcian theoretical tradition of identity development and (2) studies rooted in a variety of theories or studies without a specific theoretical perspective. Eleven of the fifteen studies fell into the first category and used Marcia's

(1966) operationalization of Erikson's (1968) identity theory—extended by Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens and Beyers (2006) and by Crocetti, Rubini and Meeus (2008)—as the basis of their theoretical framework. These studies applied general identity theory to the identity domain of religion and to a strictly religious adolescent population. Four of these eleven studies took both the perspective of the Erikson-Marcian identity theory and other perspectives such as self-determination theory and Beit-Hallahmi's (1991) religious identity theory. The second category comprises one study rooted in symbolic interactionist identity theory, a study rooted in social learning theory, and two studies that did not offer a specific theoretical framework.

In summary, there appears to be no uniform theoretical and empirical approach to the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents, which results in a range of different interpretations and research methods. In order to provide greater clarity, we propose a conceptualization of religious identity and religious identity development that could be a first step in the direction of a typology of the phenomenon. Next, important themes that emerged from the included studies and that give insights into religious identity development within strictly religious populations are explored.

Table 2. Characteristics of the included studies

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/Objective	Methods	N + Participants	Country	Main findings
Armet (2009)	Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory Reference to religious identity, religious socialization, and identify formation	To investigate the relationship among socialization, identity formation, and religious outcomes	Survey data from the National Study of Youth and Religion in 2003 (Wave I), and 2005 (Wave II)	Subsample of respondents of high-tension religions (Assemblies of God, Church of God, Church of the Nazarene, Holiness, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, and Pentecostals) Wave I: N = 242 (age 13–17) Wave II: N = 184 (age 16–21)	United States	· A high-tension religious environment is effective in retaining 16 to 20-year-olds between the waves. · As adolescents increase personal autonomy (or conversely, when parent's monitoring declines), the importance of religion, but not attendance at religious services, is subject to parental influence.
Chaudhury & Miller (2008)	No specific theoretical perspective Reference to religious identity, and religious identity formation	To examine the process of religious identity formation among second-generation Bangladeshi American Muslim adolescents, and to explore the specific factors that either facilitate or inhibit the process of religious identity formation in this population	Semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, and grounded theory	N = 16 Bangladeshi American Sunni Muslims (age 16–20)	United States	· In religious identity formation, Bangladeshi American Muslim adolescents recognize both their Muslim and their American side, spending a great deal of time finding their personal balance of these dialectical components.

Table 2 continued

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/Objective	Methods	N + Participants	Country	Main findings
Cohen-Malayev et al. (2009)	Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory Reference to religious identity, religious socialization, exploration, and identity formation	To investigate the nature of the religious exploration processes among Modern-Orthodox Jewish emerging adults in Israel	Open-ended questionnaire and thematic analysis	N = 104 religiously raised Modern-Orthodox Jewish emerging adults (age 18–31), mainly Modern-Orthodox Jewish	Israel	· Exploration of significant identity concerns may take various forms (three different types), differing with regard to the quality of cognitive processes and affective experienced involved.
Cohen-Malayev et al. (2014)	Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory and self-determination theory Reference to religious identity, religious socialization, identification, internalization, integration and exploration, and identity formation	To investigate teachers as religious socialization agents through their facilitation of students' identity formation processes	Dyokan questionnaire	N = 2691 students from the Jewish public-religious sector (grades 9–12)	Israel	· Teachers and schools do significantly contribute to student religious identity even after accounting for parental religiosity. · Different modes of teacher functioning and school climate influence adolescents' religious identity. · Meaningful religious studies promote religious identity development.

Table 2 continued

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/Objective	Methods	N + Participants	Country	Main findings
Dollahite & Thatcher (2008)	No specific theoretical perspective Reference to religious identity, internalization, and transmission	To investigate the conversation processes manifested when highly religious parents and their adolescent children discuss religion	In-depth family interviews, questionnaire, and grounded theory	N = 57 married couples and their 77 adolescent children (age 10–20) from various faith communities (highly religious)	United States	· When parent-adolescent religious conversations are youth-centered, the emotional experience is more positive for parents and adolescents than when they are parent-centered.
Fisherman (2004)	Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory and the religious identity theory of Beit-Hallahmi (1991) Reference to religious identity, spiritual identity, religious identity formation, and spiritual development	To examine the relationship between spiritual identity and ego identity among religiously observant adolescents in Israel	Questionnaires: The Adolescents Ego Identity Scale (AEIS) and the Religious Beliefs Questionnaire (RBQ)	N = 78 10th graders studying in Jewish dormitory institutions	Israel	· There is a positive and significant relationship between religious belief and general ego identity.

Table 2 continued

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/Objective	Methods	N + Participants	Country	Main findings
Fisherman (2011)	Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory and the religious identity theory of Beit-Hallahmi (1991) Reference to faith identity, religious identity, and identity development	To examine the influence of various socialization agents on the faith identity and religious behavior of religious Israeli adolescents	Questionnaires: Faith Identity Questionnaire, Religious Behavior Questionnaire, and Socialization Agents' Influence Questionnaire	N = 462 Jewish religious Israeli adolescents (grade 7–14)	Israel	· In a comparison of the three agents of religious socialization—parents, teachers, and friends—the greatest influence on religious identity is that of the parents, for both genders, for most age groups, and for both areas of influence (faith identity and religious behavior). · The strength of the influence of the peer group is the least, and that of teachers depends on gender and age.

Table 2 continued

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/Objective	Methods	N + Participants	Country	Main findings
Fisherman (2016)	Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory and the religious identity theory of Beit-Hallahmi (1991) Reference to religious identity, faith identity, spiritual identity, religious identity development, faith identity development, and spiritual identity crystallization	To examine the connection between raising doubts regarding religious faith and religious identity among religious Modern-Orthodox boys in Israel	Questionnaires: Faith Identity Questionnaire, Past and Future Doubts Questionnaire, and Religious Behavior Questionnaire	N = 472 male Modern-Orthodox adolescents, studying in state religious high schools (grade 9-11)	Israel	· There were significantly higher scores for the 9th graders for faith identity and religious behavior than the 10th graders. · There were significantly higher scores for the 11th graders for faith identity and religious behavior than the 10th graders. · The 10th graders' scores for doubts are significantly higher than for the 9th graders, and the 11th graders' scores are lower than the 10th graders, and higher than the 9th graders.

Table 2 continued

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/Objective	Methods	N + Participants	Country	Main findings
James et al. (2014)	Social learning theory Reference to religious identity, religious transmission, and socialization	To evaluate the transmission model on a sample of Jewish parents and youth	Questionnaire: a combination of self-created scales and scales of Gamoran and Boxer (2005) on religious identity, student ritual practices, and family ritual practices	N = 233 Jewish parents (Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative) and their children (grade 7–12) from the Jewish School Study	United States	· There were no interactive effects between parental religious behaviors and denomination for any youth religiosity variables (youth salience, youth practice, and youth Jewish identity). · Increases in parental religious practices were related to more religious salience and to more religious practices for youth. · There is modest support for the transmission model of religious socialization as well as for the consideration of cultural effects.

Table 2 continued

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/Objective	Methods	N + Participants	Country	Main findings
Layton et al. (2012)	Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory Reference to religious identity, religious exploration, identity development, and identity formation	To gain a deeper understanding of the processes of religious identity exploration during adolescence and to explore the role of adolescents' relationships with others	Open-ended interviews, grounded theory	N = 78 Jewish, Christian, and Muslim adolescents (age 10–21) of different religions	United States	· There are various catalysts, strategies, and patterns for religious exploration. · Many different circumstances, contexts, and relationships in adolescents' lives lead them to examine and explore their religious beliefs and commitments. · The richness of the exploration process cannot simply be captured by measuring whether or not an adolescent has had religious doubts, but must be tied to relational and contextual factors. · Commitments seem to be a resource that adolescents use as part of the ongoing process of religious exploration.

Table 2 continued

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/Objective	Methods	N + Participants	Country	Main findings
Peek (2005)	Identity theory rooted in symbolic interactionism Reference to religious identity, religious identity development, and religious identity formation	To explore the process of religious identity formation and to examine the emergence of religion as the most salient source of personal and social identity for a group of young Muslim-Americans	Focus group interviews, individual in-depth interviews, and participant observation	N = 127 mostly highly religious Muslim students (age 18–33)	United States	· Three stages of religious identity development were identified: religion as ascribed identity, religion as chosen identity, and religion as declared identity. · As the participants moved through each of the stages, their faith became more intense, and their religious practice increased. · Identity salience hierarchies may change over time.
Schachter (2004)	Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory Reference to religious identity, identity configurations, and identity formation	To examine the different possible ways in which individuals construct coherent identities from conflicting identifications	Open interviews (life story perspective) and narrative analysis	N = 30 Modern-Orthodox Jewish students (mean age 26.5)	Israel	· Four distinct possible ways of configuring conflicting identifications were identified: the configuration based on choice and suppression, the assimilated or synthesized configuration, the "confederacy of identifications configuration, and the "thrill of dissonance" configuration.

Table 2 continued

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/Objective	Methods	N + Participants	Country	Main findings
Schachter & Ventura (2008)	Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory. Reference to religious identity, identity formation, and identity development	To describe parents' roles as active and reflective agents vis-à-vis the identity formation of their children	Introduction of a theoretical concept, illustrated with interview data (life story perspective); analysis of interviews is based on grounded theory technique	N = 20 Jewish Orthodox parents	Israel	· The concept of identity agents is missing from current conceptualizations of identity formation. · Six major components of identity agency were identified: identity concern, identity goals, praxis, assessment, implicit theory, and reflexivity. · It is necessary to incorporate the concept of identity agents in identity research.
Visser-Vogel et al. (2012)	Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory Reference to religious identity and religious identity development	To present a framework for qualitative study of the religious identity development of highly religious Christian and Muslim adolescents	Literature search		The Netherlands	· Four criteria for high religiosity were proposed. · Four criteria for orthopraxy were proposed. · The presented framework is based on identity development theories, including a narrative approach, a focus on exploration processes and the context of orthoprax adolescents.

Table 2 continued

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/Objective	Methods	N + Participants	Country	Main findings
Visser-Vogel et al. (2015)	Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory Reference to religious identity, religious identity development, and identity formation	To examine sources for the religious exploration of orthoprax Muslim adolescents in the Netherlands	In-depth interviews with open-ended questions (life story perspective), thematic analysis	N = 10 highly committed young Muslim adults (age 20–22)	The Netherlands	· Seven categories of sources for the religious identity development of orthoprax Muslim adolescents were identified. · Adolescents consider parents to be of minor importance for religious identity development, compared to teachers and religious leaders. · Other sources besides parents are especially important for religious identity development.

Conceptualizations: Religious identity and religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents

The analysis showed that religious identity and religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents were poorly conceptualized in the included articles; only one provided a clear definition of religious identity: "self-perception of their religiosity" (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014, p. 208). Four articles provided a definition of religious identity development (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Peek, 2005; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012, 2015): "a process in which individuals explore and commit to a set of religious beliefs and practices" (Visser-Vogel et al., 2015, p. 91). An explanation for the lack of a definition might be that most of the included studies derived their conceptualization from the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory and applied it to the domain of religion and to the strictly religious population under study. Therefore, future researchers need to deduce conceptualizations of religious identity and religious identity development, mainly from how identity and identity development are conceived of in the literature.

In the literature, we found that identity is conceived of as ego identity, the central concept in Erikson's ego identity theory (Fisherman, 2004, 2011, 2016; Layton et al., 2012; Schachter, 2004; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012). Schachter (2004) referred to Erikson (1968), who argued that identity is an "invigorating sense of personal sameness and historical continuity" (p. 18) that stems from the integration of different identity identifications. This suggests that ego identity comprises various identities, including religious identity, which concurs with Peek (2005), who—from the perspective of symbolic interactionism—argued that identity comprises multiple identities, such as racial, ethnic, or national identities, and are arranged hierarchically. Depending on the context, a specific identity can be more salient than another and, as a result, the individual will be more committed to that identity (Peek, 2005).

It can be argued that religious identity is one of multiple identity domains that together form the adolescents' whole identity. Religion is important for identity because it can support the integration of various identity domains into a meaningful whole (Schachter, 2004). In most of the studies, the religious identity of strictly religious adolescents comprised beliefs, values, and doctrines as well as behaviors, rituals, and religious practices. This suggests that both beliefs and practices are important markers of religious identity and, thus, we propose that for the study of religious identity of strictly religious adolescents, it is important to identify beliefs and practices either qualitatively or quantitatively. Moreover, the idea of religious identity salience might be helpful. While strictly religious adolescents are immersed in religion from a young age, they cannot only consider their religious identity more salient and prominent than other identity domains; they might also have the impression that their identity is shaped exclusively by religion, so that their religious identity is their identity.

We also found that identity development, in the studies embodying the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory, was generally understood as a process in which an adolescent "recognizes, synthesizes, and transforms childhood identifications into a single structure" (Schachter, 2004, p. 168). Other words used to describe the process include

"consolidation" (Fisherman, 2011, p. 289), "crystallization" (Fisherman, 2016, p. 121), "construction" (Schachter, 2004, p. 176), and "configuration" (Schachter, 2004, p. 170). These words suggest that identity development is an active process in which an adolescent deals with past and present identifications in order to create an identity for adulthood. Although this process has its peak in adolescence, it continues over the individual's lifespan, thereby implying a developmental perspective to religious identity development (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Peek, 2005; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012, 2015).

Themes

Contextual influence

The first theme that resonated in several studies was that in religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents, the individual and the context mutually influence each other (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Fisherman, 2004, 2011; James et al., 2014; Schachter & Ventura, 2008; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012, 2015). Schachter and Ventura (2008) argued that the influence of context has been disregarded in neo-Eriksonian studies on identity development because of a focus on the individual, even though Erikson emphasized that identity development "occurs through interaction" with the environment (Fisherman, 2011, p. 274). This implies that several contextual factors influence the process (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014; Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008; Schachter & Ventura, 2008; Visser-Vogel et al., 2015).

Building on the Eriksonian-Marcian theory of identity development, Schachter and Ventura (2008) introduced the concept of "identity agent," defined as "those individuals who actively interact with youth in order to participate in their formation of an identity" (p. 454). In the studies that referred to religious identity development in terms of religious socialization and internalization, the relationship between adolescents and identity agents has been perceived as bidirectional because both adolescent and identity agents are actively involved in religious identity development (Armet, 2009; Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008; James et al., 2014; Schachter & Ventura, 2008). What this bidirectional approach entails was illustrated by Dollahite and Thatcher's (2008) study on strictly religious youth and their parents talking about religion. In their interviews, one mother said:

> Just let them have their ideas and their thoughts and . . . I tend to flip out because I'm afraid, "Oh my gosh, they're going down the wrong path" and to realize that's all part of growing up, testing out their own faith, challenging us . . . I'm still in the process of learning that. (p. 632)

The authors found that when parents adopt a bidirectional approach in their religious conversations, adolescents are supported in exploring their religious identity and that the opposite approach could lead to frustration and disinterest. Under the unidirectional approach, religious identity development was perceived as a process in which identity

agents, like parents, transmit beliefs, practices, and values to a child, and accordingly, a child adopts his or her parents' religion (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014; Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008; James et al., 2014).

The studies made it clear that, besides identity agents, other contextual factors, such as religious events, could affect the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents, as could personal experiences like leaving home, difficult periods in life, religious organizations, traditions, customs, God and scripture, and the religious community. The influence of one of these contextual factors, leaving college and going to university, is highlighted in the study of Layton et al. (2012) of strictly Jewish, Christian, and Muslim adolescents. One participant said in the interviews:

> This year in fact especially, like entering the University … and applying to be a philosophy major, lots of questions come up. I keep having to ask myself, like "What do I really believe? What do I believe about this?" (p. 168)

Layton et al. (2012) described contextual factors using the term "anchors of religious commitment," while Visser-Vogel et al. (2015) used the term "sources for religious identity development." Thus, there are various contextual factors that could influence strictly religious adolescents' religious identity development, and it seems that identity agents, in particular, are perceived as prominent actors that could both support and hinder this process. For strictly religious adolescents, the context is usually highly influential on their religious identity development because these adolescents can be characterized as having a "strong sense of community" and a "critical attitude toward modern society" (Visser-Vogel et al., 2012, p. 118), which strengthens an orientation toward their own highly religious context. This orientation could be experienced positively and negatively. Because the strictly religious context demands, encourages, and confirms beliefs and practices, it offers adolescents a sense of belonging and safety in the development of a religious identity (Armet, 2009; Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Peek, 2005). This anchoring context could be of even more importance for strictly religious adolescents who grow up in pluralized and secularized societies. However, we suggest that for these adolescents, the highly religious context could also be experienced as overly restrictive in determining their religious identity development, especially when identity agents adopt a unidirectional approach.

Exploration and commitment

A recurrent theme in the included studies was that the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents entails exploration and commitment, two central processes in the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory. Marcia (Armet, 2009; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012) proposed four identity statuses that depend on the presence or absence of exploration and commitment in identity formation: achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion. These identity statuses reveal the degree of exploration and commitment at a certain moment in time, however, they "do not provide information on the meaning

and content of that religious identity for the individual" (Visser-Vogel et al., 2012, p. 115). This suggests that in order to gain deeper insight into the process of religious identity development, just measuring identity statuses is insufficient. Moreover, we found that, although the identity statuses might imply that religious identity development ends in a fixed status, commitment and exploration were not perceived to be static. As religious identity development is an ongoing process, a period of religious commitment could change over into a period of exploration.

Exploration entails a "period of crisis in which alternative identities are explored prior to the making of commitments" (Layton et al., 2012, p. 158). We found that the included studies highlighted variation in the religious exploration behavior, but they also found styles, patterns, and catalysts, such as the contextual factors described earlier, of the religious exploration of strictly religious adolescents (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Layton et al., 2012). In line with Cohen-Malayev et al. (2009), Layton et al. (2012), and Schachter (2004), we would argue that there is no uniform way of exploration because both the adolescent and the context could have different perceptions of the objectives and needs for religious identity development. Again, it seems that the context is highly influential, for identity agents could both promote and hinder exploration behavior such as doubting or questioning. Besides, the broader context—for example, the educational context—might affect the exploration process, as the quote of one participant in the Peek (2005's) study illustrates: "In college you have more freedom. You're exposed to different ideas and cultures. You're encouraged to experiment. I experimented with Islam" (p. 228). Fisherman (2016) went even further and asserted that education should encourage adolescents to raise doubts; however, it is questionable whether this really happens. For example, in the Netherlands and Israel, strictly religious groups have their own schools in which doubting and questioning could be perceived as undermining the religious beliefs and practices that these schools stand for and transmit.

From the perspective of the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory, commitment is perceived as a choice regarding a certain identity domain, like religious identity. According to Soenens and Vansteenkiste (as cited in Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014), a choice is followed by practices because "they experience the commitment as a reflection of who they are" (p. 287). We suggest that this explanation is problematic because committed strictly religious adolescents who have not explored might not necessarily have reflected on the meaningfulness of beliefs and practices to their religious identity before making a religious commitment. Therefore, we would plea for an examination of the nature and motives of commitments in order to grasp to what adolescents are committed and because of what they are committed, as compared with Cohen-Malayev et al. (2009) who examined the nature of exploration and identified different types.

Armet (2009) provided an interesting step in that direction because he makes a distinction between two different types of commitment in relation to strictly religious adolescents: external and internal commitment. External commitment is non-volitional

and forced, which suggests that strictly religious adolescents comply with religious norms regarding, for example, church attendance. The commitment of strictly religious adolescents who have not explored before commitment-making may thus be only externally committed. Although internal commitment was not defined, it could be characterized as volitional, unforced, and more internalized probably because of more intrinsic and deliberate motivation. Taken together, the findings regarding exploration and commitment processes indicate that these processes within strictly religious populations could be more complex than they first appear.

Autonomy and choice

A third theme that emerged from the included studies is that several studies underline the need for adolescent autonomy and choice in religious identity development (Armet, 2009; Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008; Fisherman, 2004, 2011, 2016; Layton et al., 2012; Peek, 2005). We found that the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents should ideally be a process in which adolescents develop their own autonomous, and intrinsically motivated religious identities (Armet, 2009; Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008). This means that the adolescent "is able to decide between various ideological options and is able to make an independent decision" (Armet, 2009, p. 281). We would argue that regarding the autonomy and choice theme, as with other themes, the context may play an important role in facilitating strictly religious adolescents in self-construction of religious identity and in the exploration and commitment-making processes. This was illustrated in one of the interviews in the Visser-Vogel et al. (2015) study: A highly committed young Muslim adolescent said: "In the beginning it is very important that parents provide you a basis. But, I think, at a certain point, you have to make your own choices" (p. 100). In the same vein, Dollahite and Thatcher (2008) found that adolescents increasingly feel the need "to choose their own religious identity" (p. 636). However, they also found that the orthodox parents within their research population would not appreciate it if children made a choice different from the religion in which they were raised. We would also argue that the autonomy and choice theme reflects a normative position in the literature because it echoes an ideal image of mature or healthy religious identity development: where religious identity development processes within strictly religious populations preferably should lead to and should not lead to.

This normative position is exemplified in Fisherman's (2016) study on Modern-Orthodox male adolescents in which he referred to three levels of religious identity development: healthy, unhealthy, and dangerous. He argued that healthy religious identity development occurs when adolescents move from the phase of childish faith to the phase of adult faith. Childish faith is characterized by a religious identity that is highly dependent on parents' faith, as children lack the capacity for reflection and independent abstract thinking, which is characteristic of a more mature identity (Fisherman, 2016; Peek, 2005). To develop a mature and crystallized religious identity, adolescents should grow away from childish faith identity and should question

and doubt (Fisherman, 2016). This idea agrees with the Eriksonian-Marcian identity development theory, which holds exploration as a prerequisite for the development of a healthy identity (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Fisherman, 2011, 2016).

Religious identity in Fisherman's phase of childish faith resembles the concept of "ascribed" or "assigned" identity, as opposed to a chosen or authentic self-constructed identity (Armet, 2009; Peek, 2005). An ascribed or assigned religious identity results from a process in which adolescents, influenced by the highly religious context, adopt the beliefs and practices that have been transmitted to them. This is exemplified in the interview Peek (2005) had with the highly religious Muslim student who said:

> I have never really strayed from the religion. I have never really had a boyfriend or anything like that, or gone out with friends much. I have pretty much stayed within the family. It is just things like, I believed in God and stuff. I would pray, but not well. I would do the things, but not do them well. (p. 224)

This type of religious identity implies a lack of autonomy and choice, indicating a less healthy and therefore less desirable, or even dangerous, religious identity.

Generally, strictly religious adolescents are often born into their religion and may perceive religion as a self-evident part of their lives; they may also feel no direct incentive to reflect on their religious identity (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Fisherman, 2011, 2016; Peek, 2005). Thus, they could be more inclined to develop their religious identity in line with the demands and expectations of the strictly religious context and make a more external commitment. This corroborates Peek's (2005) assertion that for strictly religious adolescents, an assigned identity marks the first phase of religious identity development, and when they grow older, they will move to the next phase of a chosen religious identity. Thus, as a natural and unintended consequence of age and growing up in a strictly religious context, strictly religious adolescents may develop an assigned religious identity.

In summary, this theme highlights that in religious identity development, strictly religious adolescents preferably should have autonomy and freedom of choice in order to develop a strong and healthy religious identity.

Conclusion and discussion

This literature review provides an overview of how religious identity and religious identity development were conceptualized and investigated in 15 studies exclusively within strictly religious adolescent populations. It also revealed that there is little empirical and theoretical research into the religious identity development of this population, hence the low number of studies that survived the inclusion criteria. The major contribution of this review is that it has organized and discussed the literature

on this topic and provided insights into key concerns that could move the literature and future empirical research to the next level.

One finding to emerge from the review is that the included articles addressed the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents, for the most part, from the perspective of the Eriksonian-Marcian theory of identity development, which was applied to the religious domain; fewer pursued other theoretical perspectives, such as symbolic interactionism and social learning theory. Within these perspectives, various terms and conceptualizations and different methods were used, which suggests that the literature is diffuse and ambiguous. This finding is in line with Cieciuch and Topolewska (2017), who argued that within the Eriksonian-Marcian tradition of identity development, researchers deal with "different aspects of identity formation" (p. 38) and apply different interpretations of concepts. Therefore, it is important that future researchers of the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents are specific in their conceptualizations in order to focus their theoretical framework and empirical research. Moreover, the development of a typology that considers strictly religious adolescents is an important issue for further research. Our review and proposed conceptualizations could be utilized as a research guidance framework in the development of this typology.

Most of the studies were rooted in the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory, which indicates the frequent application of this theory in theoretical and empirical research into religious identity development within strictly religious adolescent populations. It seems that this theory approaches religious identity in the same way as identity is approached in other domains. However, we question whether this theory recognizes the uniqueness of religious identity because religious identity development is about more than a bidirectional relationship between the individual and the context. According to Bell (2008), religious identity is the only identity domain involving a link to something or someone that transcends the self, like a god. This idea is consistent with Driesen et al. (2005), who refer to a "supra dimension" of identity beyond intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. It thus seems that there is in some way or another a perception of a tridirectional relationship among the individual, the context, and transcendental in religious identity development. The supra-identity dimension is characterized by the "collective voice" of the religious tradition, and this voice "holds authority, and must be taken over in its entirety by the individual" (Driesen et al., 2005, p. 240). Because strictly religious adolescents grow up with prescribed authority, beliefs, and practices, it might be that the perceived supra-identity dimension is very prominent in their religious identity development. We recommend that future researchers who apply the Eriksonian-Marcian theory to the domain of religion elaborate more on this specific characteristic of religious identity and its implications for the empirical study of religious identity development.

The first presented theme, contextual influence, showed that for strictly religious adolescents, the context significantly affects religious identity development because this context inherently generates demands and expectations regarding religious beliefs

and practices. At the same time, we found that adolescents need to construct their religious identity without the expectations of identity agents (Schachter & Ventura, 2008). Therefore, further research should be undertaken to investigate how strictly religious adolescents experience this contextual influence and also to identify what this influence means for their religious identity development.

The second theme, the exploration and commitment processes, made clear that these processes are central to the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents; however, the processes are complex and there are still unanswered questions, for example, about the nature and motives of the religious commitments these adolescents make. More research is needed that assesses the complexity of the exploration and commitment processes. We agree with Visser-Vogel et al. (2012) that it is not possible to develop a full picture of religious identity development when only the presence or absence of exploration and commitment processes is identified. We, therefore, suppose that qualitative methods such as the life story perspective of McAdams (1988, 2005, 2008), which was utilized in three of the included studies (Schachter, 2004; Schachter & Ventura, 2008; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012), are suitable for the study of religious identity development within strictly religious populations. This is because in storytelling, where adolescents narrate their life stories, religious identity and the process of religious identity development become apparent. Moreover, narrative interviews that aim to elicit stories allow for a detailed exploration of complex topics, thereby revealing not only the essence of processes like commitment making but also the reasons and motives behind them (Straub & Arnold, 2008).

The third emerging theme regarding autonomy and choice proposes that, taking a normative position, the religious identity of a strictly religious adolescent is healthy if it is authentically and autonomously chosen. We would argue that a weakness in this position is that it reflects a postmodern, and Western view on identity development and thereby overlooks the distinctive nature of strictly religious communities and their unique cultural characteristics. For example, Zwemer (2001) maintained that strictly Reformed Christians in the Netherlands are strongly oriented to their own community and deliberately distance themselves from postmodern influences such as pluralism and individualism. Therefore, it is questionable whether it is appropriate to hold a postmodern view on the religious identity development of a population that does not adhere to the principles behind this view. Likewise, Lam (1997) stated that autonomy is a Western concept and an essential concept in the Eriksonian-Marcian identity development theory, and cannot be applied to the Chinese culture because, for example, the Chinese culture focuses on collectivity whereas Western culture emphasizes individualism. Thus, it seems important that future researchers into religious identity development within strictly religious populations applying Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory to religion should be aware of the Western and postmodern discourse inherent in this theory, and should consider the distinctiveness of strictly religious community and the cultural contexts they investigate.

The generalizability of the findings of this review is subject to certain limitations. First, the included studies and the data are limited because of the small sample size. Our aim, however, was to organize the available literature and to discuss recurrent themes in theoretical and empirical studies, which should initially benefit future research into the religious identity development of strictly religious populations. Second, the included studies were mainly conducted in the United States and Israel, and they focused on Jewish and Muslim adolescents, which offers a limited view on the topic. Future researchers should consider other strictly religious populations and other research settings in order to gain a better understanding of religious identity development in different contexts and in relation to different religions.

To conclude, future work needs to be done to enhance understanding of the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents. This understanding is crucial for theory building and for educators who guide these adolescents in their challenging religious identity development process.

4

Religious identity commitments of emerging adults raised in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands

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Introduction

The Netherlands is among the top five European countries with the highest share of emerging and young adults who identify with no religion and identify the least with Christianity, according to the European Social Survey (2014–16; Bullivant, 2018). Statistics Netherlands confirms these findings from the Dutch context: 67% of emerging adults (18–25 years old) in the Netherlands do not have a religious commitment, the highest percentage among all age groups (Schmeets, 2018). However, these figures do not reveal anything about the religious backgrounds of emerging adults who identify as non- religious, such as whether they grew up in religious contexts. Nor do they reveal anything about emerging adults' religious identity commitments, such as what religion means to their lives and what being religious entails.

Considering this lack of in-depth insights into emerging adults' religiosity and the importance of religion for identity construction, especially in emerging adulthood, it is important to study religion within youth populations in different contexts (Arnett, 2015[14]; Erikson, 1964; Fivush, 2013; Hunt, 2005; Negru et al., 2014; Niemelä, 2015; Schachter, 2004). In this study, we approach youth religiosity from the perspective of religious identity development. More specifically, we explore religious identity commitments within a population of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. This population is of interest as the strictly Reformed contexts in which the emerging adults were raised comprises a large minority group of Dutch religious people (Snel, 2007). Consequently, these emerging adults are different from the majority of their peers raised in non-religious contexts. Although there is an existing body of research on youth religiosity of minority groups in secular contexts, see e.g. the study of Kuusisto (2011) on Seventh-Day Adventist youth, we find that there is little empirical research available on strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults. What we know about this population stems from often-critical public opinion or strictly Reformed contexts (e.g. small-scale, non-scientific research by the strictly Reformed newspaper).[15]

In this study, therefore, we scientifically investigate strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults and their religious identity commitments. Based on interviews with eighteen emerging adults, we identify three groups: (1) those who identify as strictly Reformed; (2) those who identify as Christian in a broader sense or those who do not yet know what to stand for; and (3) those who identify as non-religious.

Religious identity commitments

To conceptualize religious identity commitments, we build on Erikson's identity theory as operationalized by Marcia (1966) and further developed by identity researchers (Crocetti et al., 2008; de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Luyckx et al., 2006). We

14 In the published article, we referred to the first edition of this book as Arnett (2006).

15 Reformatorisch Dagblad.

perceive religion as a domain that, together with others such as ethnicity and career, constitutes a person's overall identity. According to Erikson (1964, 1968), religion is important to identity as it can support sameness and coherence by offering a stable framework that helps make sense of the world and grounds and directs behavior. Religious commitments thus contribute to a coherent identity, are crucial to positive perceptions of self and others, and answer questions about the meaning and purpose of life, which often arise during adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Fivush, 2013). Religion seems to be even more important to identity in postmodern, pluralist, subjectivist societies in which fluidity, non-commitment, and openness to everything seem to be normative (Good & Willoughby, 2007).

In this study, we define religious identity commitment as a dedication to particular religious content, conduct, and conforming lifestyle. This definition includes not only beliefs, practices, and values but also other aspects of religion such as attitudes, experiences, affiliation, and belonging (Hemming & Madge, 2012). Religious identity commitment thus is a bricolage of various factors that reflect the degree of an individual's religiousness or non-religiousness, or the meaning of religion or faith to a person's life and identity. Our definition differs from Erikson-Marcian identity theory's conceptualization of commitment as a choice concerning beliefs, values, practices, and behaviors within the religious identity domain. Based on our data, we propose that this definition is too static and narrow (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012). It is too static, as we observe that our population and other emerging adults do not make definite choices regarding their commitments, and it might not be clear that strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults who are religiously socialized experience choice in making commitments (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019). Moreover, this definition is too narrow, as we observe in our data that commitments are constituted by not only beliefs and practices but also experiences and attitudes. Notwithstanding the limitations of Erikson-Marcian identity theory's conceptualization of commitment, we suppose that in line with this theory, commitments need to be studied while considering the specific societal context in which these commitments develop and are made (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019).

Strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands

Strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults develop their selves in contexts that can be characterized as subcultures that transmit and imposes orthodox Christian beliefs and practices. The core beliefs of the strictly Reformeds, following the *Nadere Reformatie*, are the total depravity of humanity and salvation only by the sovereign gift of God's grace, a process that is accompanied by repentance of sin, personal conversion, and often radical changes in a person's way of living (Exalto, 2007; van Belzen, 2008; van der Veer & Janse, 2016). Strictly Reformed adherents perceive the Bible as the infallible Word of God, the truth that guides believers in life, and they hold conservative views on topics such as sexuality, abortion, and euthanasia (van der Veer & Janse, 2016). Regarding religious practices, children go to church twice on Sunday from a young age,

attend catechism class[16] and strictly Reformed schools, and grow up surrounded by a strictly Reformed newspaper, political party, and organizations. Furthermore, there is a concern about appearances; women commonly wear dresses and skirts, and men sometimes may not have beards or long hair.

Current study

The main question guiding this study is: What are the religious identity commitments of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands? By answering this question, the study is intended to contribute to an understanding of the Dutch population of emerging adults with a strictly Reformed education and their religious identity commitments.

Methods

Analysis

All the first interviews were subjected to thematic analysis as it identified patterns and important themes. Thematic analysis was also "a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences and generating unanticipated insights" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). The first author was primarily responsible for performing the coding and interpretation and used the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti to carry out the analysis. She intensively read the transcripts and open coded all the data segments that indicated the participants' religious identity commitments, including segments that went beyond the factors of choice, beliefs and practices. We believed it was necessary to code the transcripts in detail and to be as open to the data as possible as we did not want to miss possibly important themes. In the analysis process, we moved back and forth between coding the transcripts and reviewing the code list. By repeatedly organizing, grouping, and merging the codes, we developed a more organized code list with main codes and subcodes that described the higher-level meanings of the data segments. After completing coding, we further analyzed the codes that gave insights into the participants' religious identity commitments: codes on the objects[17], content and motivations of the participants' commitments and their beliefs, practices, values experiences, and attitudes.

During the analysis, we made memos on our analytical thoughts and choices, and left comments reflecting our interpretations of the codes. We distinguished the relationships between the codes by making networks views of the semantic links among

16 This weekly class teaches teenagers and adolescents about the Bible and the Dutch Reformed Confession, including the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt.

17 In the published article, we referred to this as *subjects*.

them. Finally, the researchers and co-authors of this article discussed the codes and their interpretations.

Results

Although all the participants grew up in strictly Reformed contexts and were religiously socialized in generally the same way, we observed that they had highly diverse and diffuse religious identity commitments. It, therefore, was too simplistic to categorize them as religious or not, as Christian or not and as strictly Reformed or not. Consequently, the three participant profiles that emerged during the participant recruitment did not appropriately characterize the population and their commitments.

In line with our definition of religious identity commitments, our analysis made clear that the participants' commitments were a bricolage of various factors such as beliefs, practices, values, attitudes, and experiences. Moreover, the analysis demonstrated that the commitments also involved other aspects not contained in our definition, such as the objects[18] and motivations of the participants' commitments. During the analysis, we observed that all these various aspects of commitments together answered the question: *To what* were the participants committed?

To characterize the participants' religious identity commitments, therefore, we examined *to what* they were committed. We further elaborated these commitments by presenting the beliefs, practices, attitudes, experiences, and values salient and relevant to these commitments (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019). Our analysis found four characteristic types of commitments in the emerging adults' narratives: commitments to trusting God, self, rational belief, and not knowing yet. Although one religious identity commitment was most prominent for each participant, we observed that the participants showed aspects of various commitments.

Commitment to trusting in God

One of the most prominent commitments we found was that the participants were committed to trusting God, interpreted as surrendering themselves to God. This trusting God commitment appeared in the stories of the participants who identified as Christians and (to some extent) strictly Reformed or not. Mathilda illustrated her trust in God when she talked about seeking answers for questions concerning interpretations of the Bible: "I will never be able to get an answer to that. . . . I just let go of that in faith, you know. Ultimately, it is God who knows the answers, who decides, who is in control." Likewise, Emily talked about what was important in life:

18 In the published article, we referred to this as *subjects*.

> What it is all about is just a sort of relaxation, like, in me or so, that I think, you know, my life has already been determined. And it is not that I sit down or I think, "It will all be fine." But you know, my, the plan, is there, and yes, I just have to follow Him.

We thus observed that this commitment to trusting God entailed that the participants had a relaxed attitude: they believed that whatever they faced in life, they could always rely on God, who would not forsake them. In line with this, we observed that the participants with a trusting God commitment spoke about God as a person to whom they felt connected. They all expressed belief in a God who could be characterized as a personal God who cared for them and was personally involved with them. As Susanna stated, "God is for me, eh, eh, it always feels like a father, and God also feels like the person who, eh, controls everything, who leads my life."

This relaxed attitude and belief in a caring, guiding God, however, did not mean that the participants committed to trusting God always felt secure and stable in their religious identity commitments or believed that God prevented insecurity or instability. Most explained that they experienced ups and downs in their faith. Norah shared:

> One time, you have peaks and valleys. Say, sometimes you think of it, or you don't really think about it or feel like the Lord is, the Lord God is very far away, you know. And at other times then, He is very close.

Concerning the practices associated with this commitment, we found that all of the participants with the trusting God commitment went to church weekly and saw prayer and Bible study as important elements in their daily lives. Also, we found that sharing and living their faith was an important value to these participants. Rachel explained that she considered it to be important that "other people come into contact with the faith, eh, or see how good it is or, eh, believe."

Self-commitment

Another prominent commitment we found was that the participants expressed in the interviews that they were committed to themselves: to what they wanted and liked to do, and to what they thought was good to do. This self-commitment appeared in the stories of the participants who did not (for one participant only partly) identify as Christian and, accordingly, no longer identified as strictly Reformed. Adrian exemplified these participants' commitment to self when he compared his lifestyle with those of his Christian parents: "They live by faith, so all, all the choices they make are made because of faith. I actually live without faith, so I just live freely, and . . . I make choices at the moment when I want to make them." Similarly, we found that several participants experienced self-commitment as freedom. As Christoph illustrated, "I don't really have very clear frameworks for myself, so I don't really have any, eh, rules for myself. . . . Therefore, you are, I am actually very free in life, I feel." Although the participants

lacked frameworks that could guide their choices in life, we observed that they made their own choices based on what felt good and best suited them. Julia explained, "I do what feels good. Like, you have to make, eh, choices every day. Yes, I try to choose what suits me best then."

We observed that these participants did not narrate any clear, distinguishable commitment beliefs and practices, which might be explained by what Christoph referred to as a lack of "frameworks." Nevertheless, in their stories, the participants expressed that they considered acceptance of everyone and freedom for everyone to be important values, corresponding to the commitment experience of freedom. Julia stated, "I just think it is very important that, yes, that everyone has their own value. Like, that everyone is him or herself and accepted." In line with this statement, the participants' stories demonstrated an attitude that we characterized as consideration for others as the participants respected others' beliefs and practices, primarily those of their strictly Reformed families. Richard narrated the religious practices in his family home, including praying and Bible reading: "Praying, I will join in, and I will, but that is just a little out of respect for my parents. I don't think it is necessary to argue about that."

Commitment to rational belief

A less prominent but characteristic commitment we found was that the participants were committed to a rational belief in God in contrast to a faith that "really worked in your heart," as Felix stated, or faith interpreted as "a personal relationship" with God, as Lois stated. We found two manifestations of this commitment with their own accompanying beliefs, practices, and experiences. The main difference between them was that the participants had different perceptions of God and humankind.

In the first manifestation, the participants identified as strictly Reformed and Christian. Felix illustrated this position when he questioned himself: "Well, you believe the Word and His commandments, 'but eh, did it really work in your heart?' That's the next question." These participants believed in God, but they had not experienced a moment of conversion, so they perceived themselves not as truly believing but as unconverted. These participants expressed a belief in God who could be characterized as a remote God: an almighty Creator of whom they were in awe as He reigned over the earth and humankind. Simon explained that he perceived God as "the director of, eh, the things, who, yes, of everything that happens. Like, that He has everything under control." We observed that these participants spoke about God in general terms instead of personalizing their beliefs. They did not say that God had made them and controlled their lives, thereby including themselves in their beliefs. We also observed that in the interviews, they repeatedly stressed the belief that humankind was sinful and failed to do what God wanted.

Regarding the commitment practices, we found that praying, Bible reading and going to church were recurring elements in their daily lives, and they considered it important to live for the glory of God. However, it appeared that unlike the participants

committed to trusting God, these participants did these practices as they were perceived as the "means" by which God reached out to humankind and thus the means to become converted. Simon explained that "if you believe that there is a God, and then, then you also feel the need to be engaged with it to be converted, and therefore, you go to church."

The second manifestation involved a participant who identified herself as a non-strictly Reformed Christian. Lois stated:

> That personal relationship with God, I don't have that, eh, so that is why my life, when I describe it that way, a day in my life, you might think, "Well, is that a Christian? I do not hear her say, for example, 'I pray, or I read from the Bible.' Or, 'I join a Bible study."' . . . So the faith is a bit in my head, but in daily practice, it is not really reflected.

This quotation shows that although Lois identified as Christian, she thought that her commitment lacked an important element: the experience of a personal relationship with God. Also, this statement shows that this participant did not perform religious practices such as prayer and Bible study, and she also narrated that she rarely went to church. Concerning this commitment beliefs, we found that this participant believed in a God who took care of her, and to whom she could relate. Accordingly, she experienced "plenty of peace" in life as God "sees" her. We also found that she considered it important to share and live her faith, which entailed that she "pass on something from Him to other people, then I yes, that I am doing the right thing, that I am trying to live a good life."

Commitment to not knowing yet

A striking commitment, we found that several participants were committed to one of the previous commitments but also to not knowing yet what to stand for. One participant did not fit the other commitments and was only committed to not knowing yet. She thus seemed to be in between being Christian and being non-Christian. Lauren stated, "my parents are quite religious or so, eh, for myself, I do not know at the moment what I think about that." The not-knowing-yet commitment appeared mostly in the stories of the emerging adults with self-commitment, as they expressed that they knew to what they were not committed (the Christian faith), but they did not know yet for what they stood instead. Richard stated, "I do not say that I know how it is indeed, but I know what it is not. At least, I think so."

We propose that this commitment might have been characterized as a provisional, flexible commitment, as illustrated by Christoph's response to the interviewer's question about what he thought about the Christian faith:

> I would say something as, eh, eh, that I do not quite know, eh, and that I see it more as an, eh, still a kind of something that is not completely fixed in my

> life. . . . I would rather give an abstract answer as: "to what extent can we as human beings think of who God is or what God is or what heaven is or what faith is at all?" . . . And I actually do not mind that I do not get everything right as I prefer, eh, that I do not know than that I create, eh, a false certainty for myself. Eh, so I would say, so that [is] why I do not quite know at the moment.

Discussion and conclusions

In this study, we qualitatively explored the religious identity commitments of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands and were religiously socialized in relatively the same way. One thus might expect them to hold homogeneous, uniform religious identity commitments. However, we observed that the participants had diverse, diffuse religious identity commitments consisting of a bricolage of various aspects. Consequently, labels such as Christian or non-Christian and strictly Reformed or not strictly Reformed were inadequate. To characterize the participants' religious identity commitments, we investigated to what they were committed and described four characteristic types of commitments, each accompanied by distinctive beliefs, practices, values, and attitudes. This characterization of commitment is in line with Layton et al.'s (2011) construct *anchors of religious commitment*, which describes to what emerging adults commit to. The participants' narratives reflected aspects of various religious identity commitments, but each participant seemed to have one core commitment among the following four types.

First, some participants were committed to trusting God, and we suggest that for these participants, as proposed in the introduction section, religion offered stability and was important to establishing the sameness and coherence of their identities. We observed that they had relaxed attitudes as they fully relied on their personal relationships with God, although they mentioned experiencing ups and downs in their faith. Reflecting on participants' strictly Reformed upbringing, we propose that those with a trusting God commitment achieved the ideal of experiencing personal salvation. We also propose that these participants either developed their commitment in close association with their upbringing or that they adjusted the transmitted beliefs, values, and practices, thereby constructing their own religious identity commitment.

Second, other participants were committed to themselves, and we argue that this commitment was related to their strictly Reformed upbringing. The transmitted beliefs and practices might have determined their lives in their early years, and in response to this possibly restrictive upbringing, they decided that they wanted to deliberately determine their own lives. In this process, they made their self the norm: they did what they wanted and liked to do, and what was the right thing to do according to them. We suppose that the self-commitment type fits typologies of Generation Y of Millennials as self-centered, seeking authenticity and guided by their own beliefs and perceptions (Niemelä, 2015). We, however, consider that it is questionable whether this

commitment type can be perceived as a *religious* identity commitment as it is applied to the participants who did not or only partly identified with the Christian faith and did not refer to specific religious beliefs and practices in the interviews.

Third, some participants were committed to a rational belief in God. We suggest that these participants distinguished between a rational belief in God, or *faith by the mind*, and the personal experience of a relationship with God, or *faith by the heart*, reflected in the commitment to trusting God. We observed two different manifestations of this commitment, implied in the participants' perceptions of either a remote or a personal God. Reflecting on participants' strictly Reformed upbringing, we propose that those with a rational belief commitment developed their commitment in close association with their upbringing. This becomes apparent in their perception of a remote God and in their strongly held belief in human sinfulness.

Fourth, other participants were committed to not yet knowing what to stand for. For this commitment, too, we point to a relationship between the participants' commitment and their strictly Reformed upbringing. It seems that when giving up the Christian faith, these participants deconstructed not only their religious identity commitments but also a framework or essential component of their identity. Consequently, they did not know what to stand for. This finding concurs with our proposed view that religion contributes to a coherent identity by offering a basis for choices and behavior, implying that when religion is no longer important to a person's identity, they lack coherence and a basis for life.

In this study, we have tried to grasp the participants' commitments by elaborating the objects[19] of their commitments, building on their expressed beliefs, practices, experiences, values, and attitudes—aspects included in our proposed definition of religious identity commitments. We propose this focus on the *what* of participants' commitments has helped to characterize commitments as discussing all the relevant beliefs, practices, values, and attitudes goes beyond the scope of this study. However, we suggest that more research is needed to demonstrate whether and how this definition functions in studies on religious identity development within strictly religious populations and other groups. Also, more research is needed to demonstrate whether and how participants current religious identity commitments develop over time.

Moreover, we suggest that future researchers use qualitative methods, including visual tools, to investigate religious identity commitments to capture the possible bricolage of commitments. This is because interview questions about who participants are and what they consider to be important in life, for example, might be perceived as big questions that are difficult to answer. A photo assignment, as we used in our study, thus might help facilitate the narration of the participants' commitments.

A study limitation is that the small sample of eighteen emerging adults prevents generalizing the findings. However, with an in-depth exploration of the religious identity commitments of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands, this

19 In the published article, we referred to this as *subjects*.

study provides insights into this population and the meaning of religion in their lives and identities. Moreover, the study contributes to the existing literature on youth religiosity and negotiations with religious traditions, communities, and upbringing (Kuusisto, 2011; Niemelä, 2015; Tervo-Niemelä, 2020; Schweitzer et al., 2017).

5

Religious identity exploration in the life stories of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands

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Introduction

Exploration is perceived as crucial to the development of a healthy, mature, intrinsically motivated identity commitment (Armet, 2009; Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Layton et al., 2012). Religious contexts may play important roles in identity development while providing "meaningful opportunities for young people to exercise their new intellectual powers to reason critically and skeptically about previous held beliefs" (King, 2003, p. 198). The social aspect of the religious context may foster exploration when emerging adults feel safe to share their doubts and questions in bidirectional conversations with peers and adults and when they are stimulated and supported in their exploration, for example, by the introduction of various views and practices (Johnson et al., 2011; King, 2003; Layton et al., 2012). At the same time, religious contexts may hinder exploration when emerging adults youth are inclined to adopt the faith and practices central to those contexts or when they are not exposed to other ideas and practices (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; King, 2003).

Considering the potential of religious contexts for exploration and considering strictly religious contexts in which emerging adults grow up with fixed sets of beliefs, practices and expectations regarding their religious identity commitments, it is relevant to investigate their exploration processes. We perceive exploration as a core process of religious identity development which is centered in but not bounded to emerging adulthood. With Arnett (2015), we assume that the stage of emerging adulthood (roughly 18–25) is of importance in identity development, since it is the life stage of identity exploration. In exploration, an emerging adult questions, doubts, shows explorative behavior, and searches for other ideas and perspectives before committing or maintaining, changing, and expanding existing commitments (Crocetti, 2017; Layton et al., 2012). This definition of exploration implies that exploration is not only a cognitive process, since youth could also do things discouraged or even forbidden for religious reasons (Visser-Vogel, 2015).

Studies on religious identity development within strictly religious contexts have revealed types, styles, strategies, and catalysts for exploration, which indicates that exploration processes are complex by their multiplicity (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Layton et al., 2012; Visser-Vogel, 2015). Still, much less is known about how exploration processes unfold and are experienced by those involved (Josselson & Flum, 2015; Kunnen & Metz, 2015). Therefore, this study examines the life story accounts of the religious identity exploration processes of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. These emerging adults have received scant attention in the research literature, and the context itself can be characterized as a subculture known for its orthodox beliefs and practices not only privately transmitted in the context of the family and the religious community by churches, schools, organizations, and a newspaper but also in the public sphere, as the strictly Reformeds have their own political party.

Main questions

The aim of this study is to provide an in-depth understanding of the religious identity exploration processes in a population of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults. Therefore, the main questions guiding this article are the following: How did strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands explore their religious identities, and how did they experience that exploration?

Methods

Analysis

We analyzed all the second interviews with ATLAS.ti, a process for which the first author was primarily responsible, following Braun and Clarke's phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, we open-coded all text segments potentially relevant in the light of the whole research project specifically focusing on exploration and experiences of exploration. This resulted in an extensive list of descriptive codes concerning participants' explorations in the process of religious identity development. Second, we merged the exploration codes into larger categories that described the meaning of the related text segments on a higher level. Third, we further analyzed the exploration codes, looking for patterns and themes concerning exploration, thereby moving from description to interpretation. In this step, we analyzed the exploration codes in relation to participants' current religious identity commitments and their strictly Reformed education because we perceive religious identity development as a contextual process in which the individual and the context interact in exploration and commitment-making (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019, 2021b). Moreover, we perceive participants' current religious identity commitments as results of their exploration processes, even though this result might be provisional.

During analysis, we kept memos and code comments with analytical thoughts, observations and reflections, and we discussed our coding processes, codes and following analyses with fellow researchers and the co-authors of this study.

Results

In this section, we discuss the three forms of past religious identity exploration we observed in our data and we elaborate on patterns we found. These patterns concern the relationships between participants' past religious identity explorations, their current religious identity commitments and their strictly Reformed education. In an earlier study, we identified four types of religious identity commitments within our population of strictly Reformed emerging adults, and we refer to these (see Table 3) while discussing the findings of the present study (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2021b).

Table 3. The participants and their religious identity commitments

Name	Gender	Age	Religious identity commitment
Simon	M	23	To rational belief
Oliver	M	23	To Jehovah's Witnesses
Evelyne	F	23	To self
Robert	M	23	To self; to not knowing yet
Adrian	M	23	To self; to not knowing yet
Felix	M	24	Rational belief
Emily	F	24	To trusting God
Lois	F	24	To rational belief
Rachel	F	24	To trusting God
Tobias	M	24	To self
Mathilda	F	25	To trusting God
Jonathan	M	25	To trusting God
Norah	F	25	To trusting God
Susanna	F	25	To trusting God
Christoph	M	25	To self; to not knowing yet
Lauren	F	25	To not knowing yet
Richard	M	25	To self; to not knowing yet
Julia	F	25	To self; to not knowing yet

First, the participants who are committed to rational belief identify themselves as Christian; identify themselves as strictly Reformed or not; believe in God without a feeling of conversion or a personal relationship with God; and they are either very active in religious practices or not active at all. Second, the participants who are committed to trusting God identify themselves as Christians; identify themselves (to some extent) as strictly Reformed or not; believe in God whom they rely on and who—they believe—will never forsake them; feel converted or have a personal relationship with God; and they are active in religious practices. Third, the participants with a self-commitment identify themselves as non-Christian or only partly Christian; decide for themselves what they (think is good to) do; have no clear religious beliefs and practices; and they are not active in religious practices. Last, the participants who are committed to not knowing yet what to stand for identify themselves as non-strictly Reformed, however, they do not know yet what to stand for instead. This commitment applied to one participant with none of the other commitments, but also to several of the participants with a self-commitment.

In our study, participants mentioned three forms of religious identity exploration: asking questions, exploring alternatives, and rebelling. Although all participants referred to one or more of these forms of religious identity exploration, five participants hardly referred to exploration at all. It seemed that for them, exploration was not truly part of their religious identity development. Lauren, who is committed not knowing yet what to stand for, explained why she did not rebel:

> I don't feel like it [rebelling]. I don't really need it. No. And at first I also thought I was convinced: "th- that is not allowed. You are not supposed to do that. That is not good." But I also notice, yes, I am not the kind of person to go out. I don't like that.

Likewise, Norah, who is committed to trusting God, reported that exploring alternatives had "no priority for me or something."

Asking questions

The first form of religious identity exploration, asking questions, was the most common form of exploration among the interviews, and we observed that the participants asked a range of questions. We categorized these questions and found that three categories were prominent (see Table 4) and almost all concerned the Christian faith or the strictly Reformed interpretation of it.

Table 4. Question categories

The strictly Reformed interpretation of the Christian faith: beliefs, practices, rules and education
Understanding: · Why do we [as strictly Reformed Christians] believe the way we believe? Why do we baptize the way we do? · Why do we need to go to church twice a week? Why am I not allowed to exercise [in the gym]?
Critical reflection: · Is the strictly Reformed perception on conversion correct? Is life indeed as I've learned it from my Reformed upbringing? · Based on what is it not allowed for men to have long hair? What makes this [having a drink in a cafe] so bad? · Why am I born in this family with this perception and experience of faith? What is the value of my upbringing if it is all not correct?
Participants' own religious identity
Obtaining faith and uncertainty: · How can I become converted? How should I seek God? · Am I really a child of God? How can I be assured of faith? · What if I die now and I am unconverted? Am I Christian in the right way? · Why have I never experienced God in my life? Why do other Christians experience such things and I do not? · Why is it that I do not always want to read the Bible? Why do I not see in myself that I am converted?

Table 4 continued

Participants' own religious identity
Position and practices/choices: · What do I believe in exactly? Why do I believe? What does God mean to me? Am I a believer or do I just not believe? · Why do I do certain things [going to church on Sundays]? How can I explain my religious practices? · How can I serve God in my life? How should you [I] live as a Christian?
The Christian faith
Understanding: · What does the faith entail? · Why does my family consider the Christian faith important? · What does the faith/the Bible say about homosexuality? What do certain Bible texts mean? · What about the differences between churches? Considering different interpretations of the Christian faith: what is the truth? The truth and added value of the faith and the Bible: · Is the Christian faith the truth? Are there no other things than the Christian faith? · How could a child be born from a virgin? Can you just believe what is written in the Bible? · What is the influence of prayer when I just did it myself? What will change if I do not read from the Bible? · Does God (really) exist? How can you be sure that God exists? · Are heaven and hell like as presented [during upbringing]? · How did the world come into being?

We observed that the question categories reflected an orientation of finding the truth or finding what is right or not right to believe and to do and why: the right rules, practices and choices; the right way to become converted; the validity of one's faith; and the veracity of the Bible. A possible explanation for this orientation might lie in transmitted ideal images of conversion and converted people. It also may be related to transmitted worldviews concerning the truth, and what is good and right, with accompanying consequences of heaven and hell. Rachel, for instance, said the following:

> Sometimes, as an adolescent, I thought, "What would it be like not to be a Christian?" Because, um, yes, you do become, uh, you prevent yourself from doing a lot of things unconsciously, like, or you do feel guilty about it. When

> you watch a movie, you think, "Yes, that's actually not good." . . . I've had a lot of things that, uh, yes, that were presented as not good.

We suppose that since participants grew up with such ideal images and worldviews, they were more inclined to explore good and right beliefs and practices only reinforced by the perceived consequences of life or death when making right or wrong choices.

Interestingly, half of our participants experienced that when they asked questions, they received no clear or satisfying answers, mostly in case of fundamental questions. Participants also reported that they were not understood by strictly Reformed parents, family members, teachers, elders or ministers and that their explorations were perceived as problematic, as Richard illustrated when he narrated about catechism class:

> There, I always had the idea, uh, that you, like, if you were a bit critical m- a critical attitude, that was not really appreciated, and I also really had the idea that, yes, many people were just less intelligent and that you just really couldn't explain an opinion or something, that, that, that they just didn't get it and then just "Yes, but that is just true," and I always experienced it as very annoying.

Patterns

Reflecting on participants' current religious identity commitments, we observed that specific question categories appeared in the stories of participants with specific commitments. First, we found that the participants committed to rational belief in God mainly asked questions concerning understanding for the strictly Reformed interpretation and Christianity. These participants did not seem to rise to the level of asking other questions, and the results of asking these understanding-questions were their commitments to rational belief. A gay participant explained that she had been so busy with exploring the issue of homosexuality and faith that she had not explored other questions concerning her religious identity:

> When I found out for myself about, uh, uh, that I was attracted to women, um, I was really busy with that, and also: "okay, what does the faith say about homosexuality?" And there has been a time when I was only concerned with faith in relation to homosexuality and nothing else.

Second, we found that the participants currently committed to trusting God also asked these understanding-questions, but the questions about their own religious identities were most prominent, especially questions about coming to faith and assurance of faith. Mathilda, for instance, said the following:

> How can I come to faith? How can I be sure? At that point, it was so prominent that I thought: "yes, but how? How could that be? I've been searching for so long, and I just don't know. How, how do I know it [the faith] is for me?"

A possible explanation of the prominence of this question might lie in participants' unsuccessful attempts to meet the ideal standards of their strictly Reformed education. Lois explained the ideal image of conversion:

> My parents, they warned about that . . . don't become too evangelical or you can't just have a personal relationship with God, eh, first certain things need to happen. You have to be very sad about your sins, and then you better hope that God will forgive you and accepts you, say, but that, that was not something that happened to young people, that, that, that, eh, yes, that were mainly older people who were converted, for example, and not if you are so young.

We suppose the prominence of these specific questions indicates participants' current commitments, as the questions resulted in a trusting God commitment: being converted or having a personal relationship with God. This commitment, however, does not imply that participants resolved their uncertainties, as we found that these questions recurred in their life stories. Rachel narrated about a period when her faith was not so active: "You doubt . . . that you do know whether it [the faith] is for you and, eh, if you were converted."

Third, we found that participants with rational beliefs and those with trusting God-commitments did ask fundamental questions; however, these questions did not seem to have much influence on their religious identity developments. We suppose that these questions emerged and were either resolved or not. When they were not resolved, the participants accepted that there were no clear answers and remained committed to the Christian faith, either on rational grounds or personal grounds. Emily exemplified this, narrating her exploration of whether the Christian faith was the truth:

> That's not a question that, uh, you could answer. . . . Of course, it is also good to do something with it and to search for an answer, but . . . you will never get the answer to that question. That's faith.

Lastly, we found that participants with a self-commitment and those who do not yet know what to stand for appeared to have asked questions in all three question categories, and we found that the fundamental questions were salient for them, especially questions about the truth of the Bible. Although some participants with other commitments referred to questioning the existence of God, only participants with a self-commitment and those who did not yet know what to stand for narrated about exploring the truth of the Bible. It seemed that they wanted to understand

key beliefs within the strictly Reformed tradition, such as the infallibility of the Bible and the existence of God. However, we observed that they mostly reported negative experiences with exploration, in particular, as we discussed, receiving no clear or satisfying answers to their questions, and we suppose that this experience stimulated their distance from Christianity or religion. Julia, who was self-committed, narrated about exploring the truth of the Bible and finding no answers that helped her:

> There were also a lot of, um, answers that actually have nothing to do with the question and that they beat around the bush, like. Or that it is, yes, that, that is because different people have written about it. . . . Um, yes, at a certain moment, I stopped search- I stopped searching.

Exploring alternatives

The second form of religious identity exploration, exploring alternatives, concerns the exploration of other religions, philosophies or interpretations of the Christian faith. We found that participants mainly explored alternative Christian ways of believing, other denominations and religious meetings or other religions. We also found that six of the eighteen participants—participants with different current religious identity commitments—did not report exploring alternatives. Richards said, "I never really did that because I, because I, uh, doubted the faith. I also immediately doubted all the others [religions]." Mathilda said, "I've always, actually I think from an early age, in some way, considered it [the Christian faith] the truth, um, and not so, never felt the need to keep searching."

Patterns

Reflecting on participants' current religious identity commitments, we observed that the intentions or motivations for exploring alternatives differed among participants. We found that participants currently committed to rational belief and participants committed to trusting God hardly mentioned exploring alternatives. When they explored alternative religions and ideas, they did it out of interest, not because they seriously considered them worthy of commitment. Simon said, "It sometimes came along, but more of, yes, some interest, or, or, or, uh, yes, how to say, not that you just delve into another culture. . . . Not that I thought about doing it myself." Compared to the participants with rational belief commitments, it seems that participants with trusting God-commitments were more open to exploring alternative Christian interpretations. As such, their explorations seem to have had more influence on their religious identity developments.

One participant, Susanna, narrated that an introductory course in the Christian faith was a catalyst to exploring various churches with her fiancée: "And then we really started exploring. 'What do we want?' Yes, and 'What do we fit in with?' and 'Where do we feel at home?' and, and 'Where do we belong?' and 'How do we think?'" Another participant, Rachel, narrated that exploring other churches while she was a member

of a strictly Reformed student union changed her perspective on her own church and, implicitly, the transmitted perception that there is just one truth:

> I always, uh, uh, said to myself: "you have to pick the, uh, good thing from an, uh, it, uh, good from an, uh, church anyway," because I, I, I, yes, you grow up with some prejudices of course, uh, that a number of churches are not quite right anyway, but, um, I have, uh, I have always experienced that [visiting other churches] as super positive, because then, because I realized that fortunately it is not just my strictly Reformed church, that, uh, as, as, as a church, and that there are many more and that I always, that you can learn something from everyone, uh, whatever you think of it.

We observed that although these participants showed greater openness, it was limited while they explored churches that were less strict than the church they grew up in and thus not interpretations that were very different from the strictly Reformed tradition.

We found that exploring alternatives was not so prominent in the stories of the self-committed participants, and only a few participants referred to exploring alternative Christian interpretations. However, participants seemed to explore consciously, and their exploration was a step in distancing from Christianity, as Tobias exemplified, who explored various churches:

> Then I visited a more evangelical church for a while, and then I thought: "well, I don't know, there they are a bit short-sighted or so. I prefer a church where it is a bit more vague or something." Well, that was the case in The Protestant Church in the Netherlands. There it was a little less defined. And well, it was comfortable there for a while, because it was not so predefined what you had to believe. . . . And then I came at a certain point that I started thinking: "yes, but, uh, if it not so clearly defined and so, then it is actually nothing." I mean, then you are just philosophizing a bit and a little bit in the air, uh, yes, a bit of pipe dreams then.

We observed that currently self-committed participants, unlike other participants, displayed openness in exploring alternative religions and ideas, although they seemed not to consider them something to which they could commit. Nevertheless, their exploration influenced their religious identity development, since it was an incentive to think about religion and believing. Adrian illustrated this when he narrated about exploring Hare Krishna, Hinduism and Buddhism: "You start thinking about, you see the similarities between religions. . . . When there are so many similarities: who actually says that what I believe is the right thing to do and that believing is good at all?"

For one participant who does not fit one of the four commitments, exploring alternative Christian interpretations deeply influenced his religious identity development: his current commitment to Jehovah's Witnesses. He explained attending Jehovah's Witnesses meetings and his father's resistance to his exploration:

> Yes, I continued [going to those meetings] because I found it more interesting [than his own church]. . . . So, I wanted to stop [going to church], but I didn't really have the idea that I, like, for example, um, I started to delve more into Jehovah's Witnesses doctrine.

Rebelling

The last form of religious identity exploration, rebelling, entails that participants do things disallowed or undesirable in the strictly Reformed tradition. We found that participants mentioned various ways of exploring with rebellious behavior: going to the cinema; smoking; using drugs; computing/surfing on the Internet; watching television/film; and changing their clothes and appearance. The most prominent ways were listening to non-Christian music, going out, drinking alcohol and maintaining romantic/sexual contacts without relationships/marriages.

Interestingly, we found that seven of the eighteen participants displayed rebellious behavior in secret. Jonathan, for example, said that he listened to pop music secretly and explained the reason for his secrecy: "Because my parents were just, uh, absolutely against it. I also did it, I just did secretly a bit, like. Anyway, I know my mom would really mind that." Likewise, Tobias reported that he secretly went to a café where his mother saw him; when she asked him about it, he denied that he was there: "You also needed it a bit. 'Hello, can I just escape the big-brother-is-watching-you?' Just the time to develop myself."

We also found that the participants who behaviorally explored the most were, at least at the time, most confident about this form of exploration. They experienced it as fun, although the strictly Reformed context discouraged it. Oliver mentioned:

> When you are in church, then it all is "that is not allowed" and, and, and, uh, it should be this way, like. And that you actually see that, I myself felt, like, at that moment, I think, of uh, yes, "the rest is also very nice. Let's do that."

Patterns

Reflecting on participants' current religious identity commitments, we first observed, like exploring alternatives, that several participants did not report rebelling. Second, in participants' rebelling, we observed variation in the degree of permitting the world outside the strictly Reformed bubble to enter their lives, which related to participants current commitments. We found that rebelling was not prominent in the stories the participants with rational belief commitments, and especially those who identify as strictly Reformed. These *strictly Reformed* participants, for example, only reported rebelling by playing computer games. We suppose that it is even dubitable whether this is really rebelling. Considering that these participants continued being very active in religious practices and staying true to the strictly Reformed tradition, their rebellious behavior seemed to have little influence on their religious identity development. Nevertheless, it is interesting that they regarded playing computer games as rebelling.

We found that in the stories of the participants committed to trusting God and in the story of one *non-strictly Reformed* participant with a rational belief commitment rebelling mainly involved listening to gospel or pop music, but also going out, and clothing different from what was expected regarding participants' appearance. Their explorations seemed to go a step further because they were more actively engaged in the practices and the lifestyles of their Dutch peers who were not (strictly) religiously raised. Still, explorations also seemed to have little influence on their religious identity development. This is because we observed that participants kept attending church and acknowledging the importance of religion in their lives while rebelling. The only impact was that some participants experienced a temporary decrease in religious observance, as Jonathan illustrated: "In that period, I was just less and less busy with the faith and, uh, it was increasingly common that I, like, just skipped [reading the Bible] once. . . . So, uh, I think that it, uh, just got less and less that I was involved with the faith." We thus suppose that their rebelling was also short-term; by the time they felt they committed to trusting God, they had already stopped exploring.

We also found that the self-committed participants rebelled the most and that they in their rebelling stepped out of the strictly Reformed bubble and blended with a non-strictly Reformed or even secular lifestyle. These participants rebelled not only through music and going out, but also through forbidden practices within strictly Reformed contexts such as alcohol and drug use, romantic/sexual contacts without relationships/marriages, and foul language. Robert explained:

> When I was still somewhat Christian, so the first year, I still had difficulty with going out, for example, but I sometimes did do that for sure, and I really enjoyed it even. But, uh, especially when that increasingly fragmented that Christianity, I am, I just got a much more open perspective. And in the beginning, I think I had the idea that certain things I did felt, uh, like trying something or something or, uh, as breaking with what I, but now have such a free view of the world. . . . Well, for example, premarital sex. I have not dared to do so for a long time, but yes, you were more and more curious about that of course. And of course, at some points, it happens. Uh, so, yes, that really felt like, yes, looking for your own space, uh, and switching the line in a way. Um, yes, and for a while I smoked weed quite a lot, or quite a bit, but smoked weed more or less regularly, but then I already no longer had the idea that it was not, uh, or not allowed to do.

This quotation shows that for self-committed participants rebelling is initially experienced as something wrong. However, while rebelling, they felt it was rather a positive than a negative experience and, as a consequence, they often incorporated the rebellious behavior in their lifestyle. We propose that these participants, through rebelling, moved from trying out what is not allowed to do, considering strictly Reformed norms, to doing what they want to do, considering their own norms. Moreover, we propose, as Robert illustrates, that rebelling strengthened these participants in choosing their

own pathways and developing an own view of the world. Thus, it seems that for self-committed participants, rebelling contributed to the development of a commitment oriented to self instead of the faith.

Discussion and conclusion

This study sought to provide insights into the religious identity exploration processes and experiences of emerging adults raised in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. It showed that the prominence of exploration in their religious identity development differed among participants and that when participants explored, they asked questions, explored alternatives and/or rebelled.

Regarding the forms of exploration, asking questions can be characterized as a cognitive form of exploration, as it appeared that participants sought to understand the beliefs and practices of the strictly Reformed interpretation of faith. As such, similarities presumably exist between exploring by asking questions and styles of exploration that have appeared in other studies. The question category about strictly Reformed beliefs, practices and education reflects aspects of the style "exploration within contextual boundaries" (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009, pp. 241–242) and "conscious and deliberate making choices" (Visser-Vogel, 2015, pp. 82–84). The question category about participants' religious identities reflects aspects of the style "exploration in depth" (Visser-Vogel, 2015, pp. 79–81). Likewise, the fundamental questions concerning Christianity could be perceived as questions that match the "radical exploration" style (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009, pp. 242–244). Notwithstanding these similarities, we argue that the questions concerning coming to faith and assurance of faith are unique to our population, as we observed that these types of questions did not appear in other studies, and the uniqueness of these questions might be due to the participants' strictly Reformed education: transmitted ideal images of conversion and converted people.

The second form of religious identity exploration, exploring alternatives, could be characterized as exploration in breadth, as participants explored ideas and perceptions—including religions—different from the strictly Reformed interpretation in which they were raised (Luyckx et al., 2006). Like asking questions, the participants aimed to understand the content of those other ideas and perceptions, however, we found that they were not really open to the alternatives they explored. Moreover, considering that participants mainly explored alternatives within the Christian faith framework, exploration in breadth within our population still seems quite narrow. Therefore, it is questionable whether it is legitimate to characterize it as real exploration in breadth, in particular when participants did not seriously consider the alternatives as something they could commit to and when they did not integrate these alternatives into their current religious identity commitment (Waterman, 2015). A possible explanation for this narrow exploration might be that strictly Reformed contexts hardly provided alternatives that participants could explore.

The last form of religious identity exploration, rebelling, was aimed at trying new things that were commonly disallowed in the strictly Reformed context. As the participants who showed this exploration (partly) changed their lifestyles (for a while), this form of exploration perhaps had a more direct, visible influence on participants' religious identity development. However, several participants' rebellious behavior appeared to be short periods of experimentation simultaneous with religious practices, corresponding to what Visser-Vogel (2015) called an "exploration process isolated from commitment" (pp. 84–87).

Regarding the patterns we observed, we found that participants with particular commitments displayed particular forms of religious identity exploration. We first found that participants currently committed to rational belief explored the least, whether strictly Reformed or not. When they explored, it remained superficial: they commonly asked understanding-questions, their perceived rebelling could hardly be interpreted as exploration and it seems they had no open attitudes towards the content they explored. Also, their exploration remained isolated, since it did seem like a process independent from their commitment to rational belief. Nevertheless, we argue that asking understanding-questions might indicate that participants somehow doubt the motivation for the strictly Reformed beliefs and practices and their value.

Second, we found that participants committed to trusting God were more involved with exploration, which is evident in the prominence of the questions about coming to faith and assurance of faith. The exploration of these questions seems to have affected their religious identity development, since they now possess personal faith. Likewise, exploring alternatives also seems to have had an influence. Participants either remained strictly Reformed—although adopting more open perspectives towards other Christian interpretations—or they chose a slightly less strictly Reformed church. Nevertheless, their rebelling, like the participants with rational beliefs, seems like isolated exploration with hardly any influence on their religious identity development.

Third, we found that self-committed participants explored the most and that their exploration was essential to their religious identity development. This is because all three forms seem to have played a role in increasing their distance from the faith. Presumably, their open attitude in exploration, that is, their openness to the idea that the Christian faith might not be the truth, to alternatives and to rebellious behavior, was a possible catalyst for distancing. Notwithstanding their openness, we suppose that their open attitude was limited since they hardly showed openness to an alternative and adjusted Christian faith commitment in which, for example, the historical truth and the infallibility of the Bible is not a key belief anymore. We also suppose that their perceptions of exploration changed in the process of religious identity development: doubting is accepted, and unease with it decreases. Also, other ideas are perceived as having equal value, and the initially disallowed behavior becomes part of their lifestyles.

Reflecting on the patterns we observed—that specific manifestations of past exploration are characteristic to specific current religious identity commitments—it is oversimplistic to claim that those manifestations inevitably result in those commitments.

More research is needed to show whether these patterns emerge while investigating religious identity exploration processes within larger populations. Also, it would be interesting to do case-study research on the religious identity development of emerging adults whose identity exploration processes do not match the patterns we found.

Reflecting on the contextual influence on religious identity exploration processes, we assume a strong link between participants with strictly Reformed upbringing, on the one hand, and the exploration content, ways, and experiences on the other. This link is evident in the content of participants' questions, as it echoes expectations concerning practices, transmitted ideal images of conversion and converted people, and transmitted world views about the truth and what is good. Moreover, this link is evident in the reportedly negative experiences with exploration: that strictly Reformed Christians provided no answers or unsatisfying ones or even failed to understand the participants' questions. We thus suppose that for at least a substantial amount of our population of strictly Reformed–raised emerging adults, the religious context was experienced as hindering exploration rather than, as King proposed, providing opportunities for exploration and supporting them (King, 2003). In line with Armet (2009), we argue that

> to many parents and religious leaders, doubts and deliberation appear as rebellion. Although this process of identity formation may represent a time of anxiety for family members and others within the religious community, it also represents an important time for ensuring that religious values are genuinely transmitted. (p. 281)

Based on these findings, it is important that educators in family, school and church try to "understand, encourage, and support those processes" to contribute to "genuine" religious identity development (Layton et al., 2012, p. 182).

Notwithstanding the influence of their religious context on the participants' exploration, the findings of this study suggest that exploration processes are also related to personal aspects, such as personal interest, character traits and educational level. Further research should investigate whether and how these personal aspects affect religious exploration processes and the possible absence of exploration in participants' religious identity developments. Also, it would be interesting to investigate whether and how the context beyond the direct religious context, like the demographic context in which participants grew up, influences exploration. For example, do emerging adults growing up in urban areas explore more and differently than emerging adults growing up in rural areas? Another question relevant for future investigation is how narrating about exploration processes and experiences influences participants' perception of exploration.

Although the number of participants and the specific contexts in which they were raised limits generalization to emerging adults who grew up in other (strictly) religious contexts, we suppose this study improves the understanding of religious identity exploration processes and contributes to further research and reflection on the role of (religious) contexts in them.

6

Influencing contextual factors in the religious identity development of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands

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Introduction

Strictly religious contexts are in the spotlight and attract the attention of many people who are not familiar with such contexts. This is exemplified in the popularity of Netflix series like *Unorthodox* and *Shtisel*, which provide revealing insights into strictly religious communities and how it is for youth to grow up in such communities, which are often closed to outsiders. Interestingly, these series, which depict orthodox forms of Judaism, provoked worldwide reflections and debates not only within the Jewish communities, but also on social media and in webinars, YouTube videos, and discussion groups. Topics for discussion are, for example, young people's agency and freeing from oppressive and prescriptive religions to develop their own identity. The online portrayals of strictly religious contexts and the developmental paths of young people growing up in such contexts thus give food for thought about what supports and hinders youth in taking their own paths. Moreover, they point at the influence of an all-pervading religious milieu on (religious) identity development.

Religious identity development and contextual influences

In this study, we conceptualize religious identity development as conforming to the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory, which we apply to religion as a domain of identity, as "a process in which individuals explore and commit to a set of religious beliefs and practices" (Visser-Vogel et al., 2015, p. 91). With Loveland (2016), we would state that religious identity development "is essentially social" (p. 294). This is in line with other studies (e.g., Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014; de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Fisherman, 2011; Hemming & Madge, 2012; Sherkat 2003; Visser-Vogel et al., 2015) which showed that religious identity development is shaped and influenced by the context. We use the term *context* in this study of religious identity development to refer to the micro-context of an individual's family, school, church, and peers (Schachter & Ventura, 2008). Also, the term *context* refers to the macro-context, representing the larger socio-historical and cultural context in which religious identity development occurs and which is, considering this study's Dutch population, postmodern and secular in nature (Erikson, 1968; Schachter, 2005; Visser-Vogel et al.. 2015).

We observed that, in the literature, various terms are used for contextual influences in (religious) identity development. Influential people are referred to as "authority figures" (Zittoun, 2013), "(identity) agents" (Özdikmenli-Demir & Şahin-Kütük, 2012; Schachter & Ventura, 2008), "influential adults" (Vaclavik et al., 2020), "important others" and "significant role models" (Marcia & Archer, 1993), and "socialization agents" (Fisherman, 2011). For other things, like life events, organizations, books, and events, the term "sources" was used (Sherkat, 2003; Visser-Vogel et al., 2015). To grasp contextual influences in all their manifestations, in this study we use the term *contextual factors*. This is because "sources" may indicate people or things used by an individual in religious identity development, whereas the term *contextual factors* also includes influences outside of individuals' control.

As the term *identity agent* already indicates, contextual influence is often related to agency, which our systematic literature review study confirmed (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019). In scholarship, we observed that there is an ideal image of healthy religious identity development, whereby youth "exercise agency" (Hemming & Madge, 2012) and the context honors and stimulates agency. This implies that youth are enabled to explore, and to make an authentic, self-chosen religious identity commitment; faith is not forced and that the views of youth are respected (Armet, 2009; Barrow et al., 2020). The focus on agency in religious identity development involves a perception of young people as agents actively participating in their religious identity development, thereby building up and shaped by the contexts (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Hemming & Madge, 2012; Madge et al., 2014; Schachter & Ventura, 2008). Thus, they are not perceived as "passive recipients" (Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008, p. 615).

Strictly Reformed contexts

Growing up in strictly[20] Reformed contexts generally implies that children and youth are part of a subculture that is characterized by close social ties focused on the group's own churches, schools, organizations, and sometimes even a specific geographic area (e.g., the so-called Dutch Bible Belt) where many of the strictly Reformeds live (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2021c). The strictly Reformeds adhere to the Belgic Confession and affiliate with the tradition of the *Nadere Reformatie* (Hoekstra & Ipenburg, 2008; van Lieburg, 2007; Zwemer, 2001).[21] They are strict in their adherence to orthodox or conservative beliefs rooted in the Bible and this confession. They hold strict beliefs about salvation: humans are sinful from birth, and only through the sovereign grace of God, people can be saved (Stoffels, 2008; Zwemer, 2001). Likewise, they are strict in how they practice their faith, which is, for example, apparent in their concern for appearances, including clothing (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019). We propose that contextual influence is more powerful on children and youth who grow up in strictly religious and mono-religious milieus, such as strictly Reformed milieus. In those milieus, people generally are strongly oriented to their own community in which orthodox beliefs, practices, and values are commonly shared and transmitted, with an endeavor to remain separate from the broader society (Visser-Vogel et al., 2012). Moreover, considering the specific characteristics of strictly Reformed contexts, obtaining agency might not be self-evident for youth. The strict beliefs and practices, and the accompanying expectations concerning the directions of young people's religious identity development, might leave little room for agentic commitment-making and exploration (Armet, 2009; Hemming, 2016).

20 In the published article, we referred to this as *strict*.

21 This "movement within Dutch Calvinism took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the influence of Scottish, English and, to a lesser degree, German Puritans and that strove to keep personal behaviour and experiences within the norms of religious doctrine" (van Belzen, 2008, p. 125).

Main question and perspective

To our knowledge, the number of studies that have focused on contextual influences in the religious identity development of a strictly Reformed-raised population is very limited. According to Roehlkepartain et al. (2011), there is still little academic understanding of "how beliefs and practices within a particular religious context (such as extreme authoritarianism) may undermine or misdirect" (pp. 556–557) healthy religious identity development. Considering the emphasis in the existing literature on agency and the role of context in facilitating agency in religious identity development, this study seeks an answer to the following question: which contextual factors were, according to strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands, influential on their religious identity development, and how do they value and characterize this influence? In answering this question, the perception and voice of participants are central, since we "want to know the unique experience and perspective of the individual" (Atkinson, 2012, p. 124).

Method

Analysis

With the data analysis software ATLAS.ti, all interviews were coded and thematically analyzed by the first author. In this process, she kept memos and discussed the analyses and interpretations with the other authors and fellow researchers. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure for thematic analysis, after reading the transcripts, we open-coded the text segments of the second interviews that concerned contextual influence in participants' religious identity development, which generated an extensive list of detailed codes. Second, we reviewed this list of codes several times and developed codes that discerned the various aspects of contextual influence—for example, codes for contextual factors (who or what) and codes for the reason why each factor was considered influential (how and in which way). Third, we merged all those codes into larger, thematic main codes, like *life events*, with underlying subcodes such as *life events: parents' divorce*.

In our analysis, we built on (a) what participants mentioned when we directly asked for the contextual factors they perceived as positive or negative influences for religious identity development, and (b) how participants talked about contextual factors. This meant that we considered word choice, tone, and the emphasis of certain words. For example, terms like "nice" and "super fun" were indicative of positive valuations, and terms like "superficial" and "annoying" were indicative of negative valuations.

Results

In this section, we will first discuss which contextual factors appeared most prominent in the stories of our participants, as our analysis revealed various contextual factors that, according to the participants, had positively, negatively, both positively and negatively, or neutrally influenced their religious identity development. Second, we will discuss the specific characteristics of these factors. This is because we observed that that the specific characteristics of contextual factors determined the participants' positive, negative, both positive and negative, or neutral valuations.

Influential contextual factors

We discerned two types of contextual factors that were influential in the religious identity development of our participants: *people*, of whom 29 specific individuals were mentioned in our data, and *other*, comprising 43 specific *factors* that were identified in our data. The most prominent influential contextual factors are presented in Table 5. We found that people in the inner circle, peers, life events, Christian youth groups, and activities were mentioned most.

Table 5. The most prominent influential contextual factors in the data

People	Other factors
• People in the inner circle: parents and partners	• Life events: parents' divorce or parents' struggles with the church, the birth of participants' children, a trip abroad, or family or participant illness
• Peers: friends, classmates, and roommates	• Christian youth groups and activities: church Bible study groups, student unions, and special evenings and weekends for youth (not organized by the church)
• People from church: pastors, youth leaders, and elders	• School: strictly Reformed primary and secondary school, and further education
• Teachers: of strictly Reformed primary and secondary schools and of university	• The arts: literature and music
• Colleagues (often peers)	

In general, people were considered a positive influence for religious identity development, yet in some cases were considered a negative or neutral influence. However, for parents, we observed another balance between positive and negative valuations, since more than half of all participants considered their parents a positive influence, yet almost half considered their influence negative. Focusing specifically on the Christian and non-Christian people among all influencing factors, a similar

pattern presents itself: almost all participants perceived Christian people as a positive influence, yet 10 out of 18 participants also cited instances of negative influence from Christian people.

Regarding the youth activities, these were mainly valued positively in religious identity development. To life events, it applied that they were mainly were valued as both positive and negative, as an event itself was experienced as negative but the outcome was perceived as positive. This is exemplified by Norah when narrating about a very difficult period in her life:

> Maybe it's been my high and low in my life, I guess. Well, if I just think about how it felt emotionally to me, like I was in a really deep well and kept sinking, sinking, sinking, you know, and you should have God to help you, like, and to hold you.... So that was a very difficult period, but I think it made me so aware of, um, the dependence on God.

Characteristics of influencing contextual factors

As discussed, we observed that the valuation of contextual factors mainly depends on the specific characteristics of these factors. In the following paragraphs, we will describe the characteristics based upon who people *were* and what they *did* positively and negatively. We thus focus on the characteristics of influential people, although we also found other contextual factors that were influential. This is because it was generally the *people* involved in those factors who influenced participants in their religious identity development. For example, a participant mentioned that the youth group from his church influenced him positively; however, this influence was moderated by the group's youth leader. Notably, many participants mentioned more than one characteristic when reflecting on influencing contextual factors, which indicates that not just one independent characteristic determines contextual influence in religious identity development and its valuation.

We focus on the characteristics related to participants' positive and negative valuations, and especially those most prominent in our data (see Table 6), since we propose that these will provide the most profound insights into participants' perceptions of influential contextual factors in religious identity development. Considering the valuation of contextual factors in religious identity development, we observed that participants mentioned many more positive than negative characteristics. Interestingly, our analysis showed that the negative characteristics reflect experiences with the context that appeared while discussing other topics than contextual influences in the interview.

Table 6. Positive and negative characteristics of contextual factors

Who people were—positive:	**Who people were—negative:**
Accepting	Hypocritical
Inspiring and exemplary	
Somehow similar	
What people did—positive:	**What people did—negative:**
Engaging in dialogue	Limiting
Providing other perspectives	Focusing on right and wrong

Who people were—positive

Accepting. We first found that participants considered it positive when people made them feel accepted in their religious identity development. This implied that there were no judgments and people were open to what the participants thought or did, and consequently they felt comfortable expressing feelings, doubts, and personal issues. Susanna talked about her conversations with a minister from another church:

> With him I felt comfortable because I could tell my story and that man understood me and, um, yes, or he just quietly read a passage of the Bible with you and he just talked about it and was not so critical, not with the finger pointing, or um, just like, also like: "well, that's you, okay." And nothing, nothing is weird, then, when I asked or said, like, "But why does it happen then this way [in the strictly Reformed church the participant was raised in?]"

Likewise, Christoph commented on the non-strictly Reformed student union he attended: "That has been a place where I was able to express my doubts at first and that also was taken quite seriously." We observed that this accepting attitude related to both Christian and non-Christian people but primarily to non-Christian colleagues, Christian peers, and educators in the church. Interestingly, acceptance was more emphasized when participants spoke about non-Christian people and did not occur with Christian people in the inner circle of participants, like parents and partners, although these people appeared most influential. Susanna, for example, explained about her non-Christian colleagues:

> With them, I felt very free, yes, I really had, I never had the feeling that they were laughing at me or, or, nothing at all, they didn't think it [being Christian] was strange, no, they just saw me as Susanna and, eh, that [the faith] was part of it.

Inspiring and exemplary. Second, we found that participants valued it as positive when they felt that people were inspiring and exemplary because of their religious identity commitment and the way they lived and shared their faith. We inferred that people who embodied the "inspiring and exemplary" characteristic functioned as role

models for participants in religious identity development. We observed that participants talked about them as real and genuine believers with a conforming Christian lifestyle. Lois exemplified this characteristic when talking about her friends and classmates: "The people there, I think, were real, real believers, so to speak. I was not like, um, they are, um, they fake or something." And as Jonathan described the youth leader from the church he attended in his younger years: "He really just showed with his life just that he, that he really lived for it. And that he loved God."

We also observed that inspiring and exemplary people shared their personal faith. Norah, for example, stated about a classmate: "He was always, eh, yes, very much engaged with faith or something, I always really appreciated that. We, I really was supported by him … That he was so much involved, and that he spoke so frankly about it." And Mathilda explained about a teacher and that his "purity" and the "genuine way" he talked about the Bible made her think, "that's how I want to be, so, um, that was the kind of image of how a Christian should be."

As these illustrative quotations reveal, the characteristic applied to a variation of Christian people, but mainly to parents and peers, both strictly Reformed and non-strictly Reformed peers. Two participants referred to non-Christian people who were perceived as inspiring and exemplary. Adrian, for example, mentioned that his influential non-Christian colleagues showed him "how life can be or how you can live your life."

Somehow similar. Third, we found that people were a positive influence on participants' religious identity development when participants felt they were somehow similar and that there was a common ground. This implied that the participants could identify with their views, developmental process, upbringing, or age. Identification with views appeared to be the most prominent. Christoph and Richard illustrated this identification with views, although one identified with his Christian partner and the other with non-Christian students and teachers in his university studies. As Christoph stated:

> If you both think about it [the faith] the same way, it is really, really nice. Yes, and at the same time perhaps not very stimulating, but yes, no, I think it is really relaxed. So, sort of, the feeling, it also gives you the feeling that it is fine the way it is now [his current commitment].

And Richard commented that in his university studies he felt he was not the only one who did not believe:

> … that that was indeed a kind of confirmation, because almost the whole group of highly educated Dutch people think about it [the faith] this way, have this opinion of it. You're not special if you think so or something. While in, in the beginning, it was still a bit of an exception if you weren't religious.

We observed being somehow similar to people applied to various people, Christian and non-Christian, adults and youth, but mainly to peers: friends, classmates, colleagues, and the people who participants met at Christian youth activities. We surmise that this is because participants and peers were in the same stage of life and thus had similar interests and struggled with the same things. Norah reported about the Christian youth evenings she engaged in with peers, "all people are also about your own age and many, uh, have the same questions."

Who people were—negative

Hypocritical. Several participants referred to hypocrisy as a characteristic of people that influenced them negatively in their religious identity development. Rachel narrated about the pastor of her church who put much focus on clothing and who did not greet her when he saw her clothing: "What I found difficult with him is that he, eh, of course, said everything on the pulpit, but then in practice, if you don't greet someone, I think you just don't make it true in practice."

We observed that hypocrisy only occurred in the stories about (strictly Reformed) Christians in family, churches, and schools. We posit this is because participants had implicit or explicit expectations that those Christian educators would be role models in living the faith. Lois, for example, revealed her expectations of church people when she described the church she grew up in:

> People don't talk to each other there, there is a lot of gossiping there, there is really, there is not a pleasant culture there at all. Not a communion at all, like. Um, um, that also caused me to think that, that I also in this whole period, huh, thought like: "well, if this is the faith, and if this is the church?" In the Bible I read that that a communion should be very different and that they should love each other, should help each other, and that was not at all what I saw in that church. So that has also influenced my whole, whole faith, that I thought: "well, you all say that you are a believer, but in the meantime, you gossip frequently, or, or there are arguments."

What people did—positive

Engaging in dialogue. Concerning what people did, we found that people were valued as a positive influence on religious identity development when they engaged in dialogue, mainly about faith or faith-related issues. This implied that conversations were initiated and facilitated but also that people asked questions of participants. Mathilda, for example, narrated that the Bible-study weekends she attended were a positive influence on her religious identity development: "What in that sense just really influenced me, eh, that there I could easily talk to other young people … that there, your questions, and um, and um, yes, just issues around faith, eh, you could really discuss." And Rachel reported about an elder from her church:

> He has, eh, um, um, also asked me a lot of questions, like, eh, eh, but, and "what does God mean to you?" And eh, eh, "what can you then say about Him?" And, and that is why you also start to think about: "but what, what do I believe and what, what, yes, indeed, what does God mean to me?"

Likewise, Julia explained how questions from classmates at her public secondary vocational education school were thought-provoking:

> I could never really be who I was. And then you do get questions from them [her non-Christian classmates] and I actually just answered them as my parents would want me to answer them.... Or that I sometimes had to say, like, "I have no idea, I don't know." They were questions, eh, like "how do you know that there is a God" and "what do you actually believe?"

We propose that it is interesting that dialogues appeared prominently in our data, since most participants reported that within strictly Reformed contexts it was not common to talk about the faith, especially at home. Richard said, "Yes, it was much more about doing than talking, and that has always been the case that there was little talk about it. Like, apart from Bible reading, but, really, like a one-on-one conversation about your feelings." Likewise, Lois said, "there was never really fai-, conversation about faith, what it [the faith] meant for them [her parents]."

We observed that dialogues, in our data, in most cases were mentioned concerning other factors as Christian youth groups and activities, peers (Christian or not), partners, and influential people from church, and only once concerning parents. The reported lack of dialogues at home might explain why people other than parents were a positive influence, because they talked with the participants. Another explanation might be that it is too "personal" to talk with parents about the faith, especially because adolescence is a period in which participants "distanced" from parents, as Mathilda explicated.

Providing other perspectives. We also found that people were considered a positive influence on participants' religious identity development by providing or embodying other (than the strictly Reformed) perspectives on the Christian faith or new, non-Christian perspectives on the world outside the faith. Lauren narrated about her time at the non-strictly Reformed but Christian student union:

> Then I also learned to see more and more: yes, there are many different ways you can believe because there were really many different people at that association.... There we not so many strictly Reformed people like where I came from, but yes, from all corners, eh, of Christian Netherlands, so to speak. There, that is where you learn a lot from, eh.... Regularly that, eh, I was also kind of in shock or so, and that I thought: "hey, how can Christians do that?" For example, that a group of girls went to the cinema and then

> to Harry Potter, and I thought, "yes, if you are a Christian, then that is not allowed, right?" "You could not do that, right?" And then they went, they said, "yes, but I think differently, I see it this way." And then I thought: "yes, okay, I hadn't thought of it that way."

Likewise, Robert mentioned that his university studies, "in which faith, of course, is approached very historically, Christianity is approached very historically," influenced him "very much." He realized that Christian faith is "human" and "that it is subject to change and in that sense, it is less fixed than you would, than you have always thought." And Emily narrated about her volunteering trip abroad and meeting Christians who live in completely different circumstances: "What those people, what they radiate, like, that they are just happy with such small things, and, um, also just real faith, only in a completely different way, so in that sense, that just has broadened my view."

The illustrative quotations indicate that these perspectives were represented by various influential people. Interestingly, it appeared that the other perspectives were provided more by Christian than non-Christian people. This might be somewhat counterintuitive because it might be expected that non-Christian people would have embodied or provided these perspectives. A possible explanation might be—considering that the participants generally grew up with only one perspective on faith and life—that any other perspective, even if it is a slightly different Christian perspective, expanded their horizons.

What people did—negative

Limiting. We found that people were considered a negative influence on participants' religious identity development when they felt that they were limited and prohibited from doing what they wanted. This became apparent in the stories about experiences with imposed rules, the prohibition of certain practices, the pressure to go in certain directions, and the lack of space for one's own choices and independent thinking. Julia said about the elders of the church she grew up in: "The things that I, um, that are quite important to me, they completely lambaste them." And as Tobias narrated about the response of a pastor to his intention to go to the Lord's Supper after he made the profession of faith[22] in his church, "he really strongly advised against doing that" and explained that this was because "he didn't really believe that we were real believers."

We observed that this characteristic only occurred in participants' stories about parents and educators in churches and schools, with a single exception of one participant who felt limited at the non-strictly Reformed student union he attended. Christoph noted: "They have not really created the m-, um, conditions or, really, stimulated honest conversations, which made me think, um, v- rather superficially or unilaterally at that age. About faith." It is not unexpected that this limiting characteristic

22 In strictly Reformed churches, the profession of faith is conditional to partaking in the Lord's Supper.

was related to educators in family, churches, and schools since these were responsible for the transmission of the strictly Reformed beliefs and practices.

Focusing on right and wrong. We also found that people were perceived negatively in religious identity development because of the focus on what is right and wrong and what is good and not good to do. Richard illustrated this when he talked about his strictly Reformed secondary school: "That really such, eh, rules were explained and, eh, what you were allowed and not allowed to do and, eh, eh. Well, those rules were much stricter than I [with emphasis] thought they shou- should be." Along the same lines, Lauren reflected on the strictly Reformed secondary school: "Thinking in terms of condemnations or something. Like, 'if I do this, yes, then it will never be okay.' Or like, lit-, a bit difficult to see the nuance, and eh, yes, 'it has to be this way, otherwise not.'"

As the illustrative quotations reveal, we observed that this focus on right and wrong only appeared in the stories about strictly Reformed schools, including teachers, and the stories about churches, including pastors and elders. In light of our observations regarding participants who experience being limited, it is not unexpected that participants negatively experienced this focus on right and wrong by teachers, pastors and elders, since these persons were, among others, particularly responsible for the transmission of the faith and especially the strictly Reformed interpretation of it.

Conclusion and discussion

In this study, we explored which contextual factors influenced the religious identity development of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands. We also explored how these emerging adults valued and characterized this influence. First, the current study found that several contextual factors were, according to the participants, influential in religious identity development. Interestingly, it appeared that almost all the most prominent contextual factors—except the arts as a contextual factor—are mainly on the strictly Reformed micro-level of contextual influence. This finding accords with those of other studies that have identified the positive influence of people in the inner circle, friends, church people, church activities, people with the same opinions as emerging adults, and life events on religious identity development (Tervo-Niemelä, 2020; Vaclavik et al., 2020; Visser-Vogel et al., 2015). A possible explanation for our finding that the most prominent influencing factors are in the participants' micro-context might be that the strictly Reformeds are generally strongly oriented to their own community, including family, church, and school (Zwemer, 2001).

Interestingly, it appeared that Christian people in general, compared to non-Christian people, were considered a positive influence and also a profoundly negative influence. It may be that when Christian people do something that youth experience as negative, this negative valuation is strengthened by the assumption of youth that Christians uphold a certain lifestyle whereby words and actions correspond. Also, it

appeared that the macro-context did not have a clear role in the religious identity development of our population. This is remarkable because within strictly Reformed contexts, there is the perception that youth are strongly influenced by, for example, secular media, although the strictly Reformeds often distance themselves from these influences (Klaasse, 2020; Zwemer, 2001). This discrepancy between perceived influences by the strictly Reformeds and experienced influences by our participants may be explained by strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults possibly not recognizing a dichotomy between the micro-context of their upbringing and the larger macro-context.

Second, the study found that people were at the heart of contextual influences. The characteristics of influential people—who people were and what they did—appeared to determine participants' positive or negative valuation. These findings support the findings of previous studies which demonstrated that the open-mindedness of influential people and sharing similarities mattered in religious identity development and that restrictions and limitations, authoritarian attitudes, narrow-mindedness, and conflicting religious views caused youth to consider contextual influences as negative (Kuusisto, 2009; Özdikmenli-Demir & Şahin-Kütük, 2012; Visser-Vogel et al., 2015).

As mentioned in the Introduction section, prior studies have noted the importance of agency in religious identity development, whereby the context plays an essential role in facilitating agency. The present results are significant because they reflect a plea by strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults for agency and the conditions for an agency-stimulating environment in religious identity development. Considering the positive and negative characteristics of influential people, young people would preferably feel themselves accepted, regarded as fully-fledged conversation partners, and provided with other perspectives. Also, this means that young people are allowed to find their own way in religious identity development. Nevertheless, participants reported being limited by influential people and that people focused on what is right and wrong. We propose that such socialization practices are in tension with the discussed ideal image of healthy religious identity development, involving that youth are supported rather than hindered in exploration and making their own authentic commitments (cf. Armet, 2009; Barrow et al., 2020; Roehlkepartain et al., 2011).

It is noteworthy that the research population had not intended to walk their religious identity development path alone. On the contrary, the findings indicate that they need role models who are inspiring and exemplary and with whom they can identify. As the findings show, we believe that conversations are crucial, as we perceive engaging in dialogue as an important means by which potential influential people connect with youth. Capitano and Naudé (2020), who studied the spiritual identity development of South African adolescents, maintain that exploration and commitment-making occur "through a process of discussion and modelling" (p. 25). In this regard, these authors refer to "a reciprocal and bidirectional process between the unique individual and context" (p. 20). Because of this study's focus on the participants' perspective, we were not able to identify whether there were real bi-directional relationships between our

participants and influential people, implying that the participants also influenced these people in their own process. We, therefore, recommend future researchers take the perspective of influential people into account when researching contextual influences in religious identity development.

Based on our findings, we argue that contextual influence in religious identity development is about balancing between agency and dependency. Young people need to balance between displaying ownership of their religious identity development and relying on other people's guidance and frameworks. Influential people, such as educators in families, churches, and schools, need to balance between giving space for individual choices and opportunities for exploration on the one hand and guiding youth while staying true to their own religious beliefs and practices on the other hand. In line with this, Dollahite et al. (2019) note the challenges of balancing and integrating religious firmness and religious flexibility. Religious firmness implies loyalty to God by "having clearly-defined and deeply-valued religious beliefs and practices" that are "non-negotiable" and "inviolable" (p. 14). Likewise, religious flexibility implies loyalty to loved ones by "maintaining sensitivity to their needs, challenges, and circumstances" (p. 14). Interestingly, the authors propose that when parents—and we would argue all potential influential people—strive for balancing and integrating religious firmness and flexibility, they contribute to "authoritative, balanced, functional, and healthy" (p. 14) religious socialization practices. We suggest that it is important for further studies to explore this balancing and integrating act and how both young people and influential people, including professional and non-professional educators, could address it. This exploration is especially important in strictly religious contexts where young people might not necessarily feel agentic because of expectations about young people's beliefs, practices, and lifestyles. Schachter and Ventura (2008) state in this account that "the essence of identity formation has been described as the individual's inner need to find a unique self separate from the expectations of his peers, parents, and teachers" (p. 452).

We are aware that this study is limited by the sample size of 18 emerging adults; however, we do not aim to generalize our small sample findings to the whole population of strictly Reformed or strictly religiously raised emerging adults. Notwithstanding our sample size, our qualitative research methodology allowed us to gain a detailed and in-depth understanding of contextual factors' influence on the religious identity development of an understudied population. Thus, we believe that this study provides valuable insights into what, according to strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults, matters in religious identity development and points to what young people need from contextual factors in this process. In this way, the study aims to contribute to further research on contextual influences in identity development and to offer potentially influential people tools with which they could support youth in authentic and agentic religious identity development.

7

“It is never good. Really, it’s just never good”: a pattern in the life story accounts of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults about their religious identity development

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Introduction

In one of our life story interviews with strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands, a participant expressed how the faith perceptions and experiences of family members influenced him in his religious identity development. Tobias said, "It is never good. Really, it's just never good. . . . It needs to be perfect. Like for God, He is not exactly unimportant, so it needs to be perfect." While reflecting on his religious identity development in the direction of leaving the faith, Tobias narrated: "What am I supposed to believe? And is it good enough? If I believe this, is it okay? . . . You have all those different churches, and you just have to fall exactly within the, within the strictness-range of that church. . . . If you do, you belong to the right church." These statements represent feelings of not being good enough that emerged in almost all the interviews we conducted for our research project on the religious identity development of emerging adults with a strictly Reformed upbringing. They are raised in a context that can be characterized as a closed subculture, with their own schools, churches, and other organizations. These institutions, together with families, contribute to the religious socialization of youth from an early age. As such, religion might be highly influential in the youth's development into adulthood.

Existing literature recognizes the importance of religion to an individual's identity development and life. According to Strhan (2019), religion "provides resources for integrating the fragments of modern life and the self through developing an orientation towards a transcendent unity" (p. 140). Religion helps to make sense of the world and provides a way to cope with the high and low points in life (Assor et al., 2005; Bucher, 2017; Erikson, 1968). For example, Park and Slatterly (2013) state that religion may generate feelings of love, comfort, and security. In such a way, religion may contribute to well-being, mental health, and a positive self-perception. Thus, growing up in highly religious contexts, such as the strictly Reformed, might be beneficial to youth, especially for those in the life phase of emerging adulthood, in which feelings of anxiety and uncertainty have to be faced (cf. Arnett, 2015).

We observed, however, that attention has also focused on other, more negatively perceived influences stemming from religion or religious background. These influences, such as feelings of guilt, shame, fear and depression, are addressed in the academic, mainly psychological and quantitative literature; in public discussions[23] blog posts and websites with personal stories of people who have left the faith. Generally, these are valued as negative. Several academic studies indicate that there is a link between the more negative or non-supportive influences of religion and religious domination or degree of religiousness (Bucher, 2017; Dollahite et al., 2018; Eurelings-Bontekoe et al., 2005; Künkler et al., 2020; Park & Slatterly, 2013; Schaap-Jonker, 2018). This means that the more orthodox people are and the higher their degree of religiousness, the more they report negative feelings. The theology of these highly or strictly religious

23 In social media posts, magazine pieces or newspaper columns, etc.

denominations seems to be the crux, and especially certain beliefs and God concepts (Künkler et al., 2020; Schaap-Jonker, 2018). Examples of influential beliefs and God concepts are the belief in human sinfulness; the perception of God as angry, judging and punishing; and the belief that God decides whether people go to heaven or hell (Schaap-Jonker et al. ,2017).

Current study

Our population of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands are familiar with influential beliefs and concepts like human depravity and a punishing God (van der Knijff, 2019). From a young age, these are transmitted by parents, ministers, catechists, youth leaders, and teachers as part of their religious socialization (Schaap-Jonker, 2018). Very little is currently known about the relation between these strictly religious beliefs and God concepts and more ambivalent influences of religion within a strictly Reformed-raised emerging adult population in the Netherlands. Moreover, the pattern of being not good enough—involving, for example, guilt and fear—in our data on processes of religious identity development prompted us to explore this relationship from a qualitative research perspective. This exploration is important since "the negative feeling of guilt and fear . . . can especially bring about negative developments in the development of faith and personality and must, therefore, be viewed critically" (Künkler et al., 2020, p. 12). Likewise, Miller-McLemore (2019) states in her book about faithful parenting that "fears about sin, unworthiness, and condemnation bother children in ways adults often overlook" (p. 31).

The following question guided our investigation: How can feelings of not being good enough, which emerged in the life story accounts of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands, be explained in relation to their upbringing? In answering this question, the study aims to demonstrate how their upbringing shaped our specific population. Moreover, by discussing the findings in relation to other studies, including the literature on religious identity development, the study aims to contribute to further research and reflections on religious socialization practices with different (strictly) religious contexts.

Research design

Analysis

Our initial analysis focused on investigating the main topics of our research: commitment, exploration, and the influence of contextual factors. For this purpose, the first author carried out thematic analysis with ATLAS.ti conforming to Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis. Through thematic analysis, we were able to find unexpected "common thematic elements across participants and the events and experiences they report" (Patterson et al., 2012, p. 137). In line with the principles of this thematic method, the open-coding phase of our analysis showed that besides

the codes concerning the main research topics, other codes were prominent in our data. After completing the analysis for these topics, we decided to dive into the most prominent of those additional codes[24] that emerged in almost all interviews.[25]

We read and re-read the text segments associated with this code to grasp the underlying meaning of those segments. We observed that in some life story accounts, the participants quite explicitly expressed feelings of not being good enough, while in other stories these feelings were more implicit, beneath the surface of the literal text of the narrative. In the first case, we assigned the not-good-enough code. In the latter case, we checked the whole interview to see whether this feeling was addressed either implicitly or explicitly, and if so, we assigned the not-good-enough code. We also observed that the not-good-enough code was not an independent code but was closely related to other codes that came up in the open-coding phase. We reviewed all the interrelated codes and merged descriptive codes into more abstract codes.

To explore the not-good-enough theme and to grasp how the various codes were related, we used the network view tool in ATLAS.ti. In a network, we semantically linked codes (e.g., "contributes," "is associated with," "is a cause of") to the not-good-enough code.

Results

While exploring the not-good-enough theme in our data, we found that it was strongly related to participants' strictly Reformed upbringing and that those feelings are part of a web of interconnected aspects of this upbringing: specific beliefs and ideal images, a focus on right and wrong, and a black-or-white worldview. We also observed that feelings of not being good enough are connected to feelings of guilt, rejection, and fear. In this section, we will first present how the being-not-good-enough theme appeared in our data. Second, we will elaborate on ideal images and beliefs transmitted in strictly Reformed upbringings that were reported by the participants.

Feeling 'not good enough' in participants' life story accounts

All participants except one referred in at least one of the two interviews to past or present feelings of not being good enough. We found that they felt not good enough for God, parents, and people within the strictly Reformed community, such as teachers and fellow church members. Based on our data analysis, we argue that this theme implies that participants experienced that they fell and continue to fall short. Jonathan said: "You hear the Ten Commandments every day or every Sunday, at least we do.

24 Considering the number of quotations.

25 "Experience strictly Reformed upbringing: not good enough." Shortened code name in ATLAS.ti: "exp str Ref upbr: not good enough."

And, um, yes, He [God] asks that of us and we do not stick to it. Well, let me keep it personal. At least, I don't."

We found that many participants expressed that they felt not good enough for God because they fell short in their religious practices, which was exemplified by Norah while reflecting on her prayer life:

> I sometimes have those moments, then things just fade, you know. I've had times when I really prayed a lot for persecuted Christians and stuff, you know, and now, I do that now and then, and then I forget that again. Then I'm again like, then I'm always a bit ashamed and then I think: "I'm so busy with my own world."

Likewise, Jonathan commented about Bible reading and prayer: "It is actually the case with both of them that I think, eh, have the idea that it is too little." And Christoph said that watching pornography had influenced his religious life; because of it, he "had a real and bad feeling" about himself. This implied that he "felt quite guilty before God." These illustrative quotations exemplify that feelings of not being good enough can go hand in hand with feelings of guilt from failing to do what they believe God requires in religious practices and what is good or necessary.

Although we found that most participants felt not good enough for God, some also felt not good enough for their environment. Julia illustrated this when talking about the process of leaving the faith and her parents' response: "They literally said that their relationship with me is different than with . . . my brother and sister. . . . And I felt that very strongly, that they just considered me as different and, yes, no longer even as their own child." And Susanna narrated about the not-good-enough feelings she experienced within the church she grew up in: "I always had that feeling: 'Oh, do you think this way?' You know? 'That's just wrong.' . . . If, eh, [you] did something that was just not right." These quotations indicate that participants, beyond feeling guilty, felt rejected by others because of the choices they made and the path they took in their religious identity development.

As mentioned in the introduction, we found that participants with various religious identity commitments displayed feelings of not being good enough (cf. de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2021b). Interestingly, we observed that for the participants with a self-commitment and those with a don't-know-yet-commitment, this feeling was quite salient. We find this interesting because these participants generally (to a certain extent) had moved away from the faith and the church, and thus one might expect that they had moved away from the aspects of a strictly Reformed upbringing that contribute to feelings of not being good enough. Adrian showed that this is not the case, although he wanted to disentangle from these feelings:

> There is always a kind of voice in the back of your mind that makes you think, you know, yet that is. . . . Well yes, imagine that if you are not converted, you

> will go to hell, and if you continue life on this path or whatever that could have far-reaching consequences. . . . It is confusing. It, eh, it's frustrating at times that those thoughts are still there while you're really trying to let it go.

A similar "voice" in "the back" of her mind was also reported by Lauren: "It is actually always that I think with a lot of things, 'but is this actually good?'" She illustrated: "I always eat at work, I don't really take a regular break . . . I don't really pray or anything, and then I always have that kind of voice of, yes, 'but what you do really is not good.'"

Ideal images

Our analysis clarified that ideal images—those of participants and people within strictly Reformed contexts regarding good, real or converted Christians—played an important role in participants' feelings of not being good enough. It is noteworthy that participants' ideal images are highly influenced by the ideal images of those people around them, who often transmit the images through education.

Mathilda mentioned that the "ideal image" of a real Christian she had in mind was incorporated in the "sermons:" "if you are converted, then you are all good, and then, eh, yes, then you just live, then you completely live like God wants you to . . . so you can, eh, always pray well." And Tobias illustrated the ideal image his parents held of a real Christian when he reflected on a period in his life in which he "had a positive attitude toward the faith." He then said, "my parents didn't like that . . . because it was not the right version." He continued by explaining, "it was self-made. So not, eh, it did not happen in their way. Or not in what they believe to be God's way."

We found that the ideal images participants hold of real Christians mainly reflect a perception of a Christian as someone who is converted and who dedicates all of his or her time and efforts to religious practices, and someone who is always fully focused on God. Susanna said:

> I, eh, think I don't always, always, exp-, eh, express my faith well, the way I live it. That sometimes I do, eh, quite my own way, or something, when I just don't feel like it, then I just don't do it.

Likewise, Felix said, about people who are converted by God, that they believe in God with their "full heart and mind" and they "give glory only to God." He continued his description: "That you would also avoid those worse things, such as listening to music—that clutter that doesn't matter—or watching movies. Like, that you wouldn't even want to watch or hear that."

Also, we found that ideal images were underlined by a focus in participants' upbringing on what is right or wrong to think and do, with "the right" representing the ideal images. This focus was reported by various participants. Lauren, for example, mentioned that at the strictly Reformed schools she attended, she experienced the following:

> Always much [focus on] how to do it. Just "this is the way it should be. And if you do it differently, yes, that is really, really not good." It was always about what was not allowed, what should be done, and what is not good, like. If you are from another church, that is of course actually not good.

In the same vein, Rachel mentioned that in her younger years she thought "how would it be to be non-Christian," because as a Christian, "you become, eh, a lot of things you do unnoticed, like, or you feel guilty about." She explained:

> I have had a lot of things that, um, yes, you just get transmitted that they are not good. And if you do it, then, eh, you feel guilty. And especially thinking, yes you, eh, it is transmitted, eh, that a lot of things are bad to think about.

We found that the ideal images generated a tension between what participants wanted to do and what they were able to do, which Simon illustrates. He narrated about finding it "difficult" to "do, eh, what God asks of me," implying "what I think I should do. That, that I don't always succeed."

Beliefs

Our analysis also made clear that strictly Reformed beliefs played an important role in participants' feelings of not being good enough and especially the beliefs about humankind, God, conversion, and eternity. We found that several participants developed and held beliefs about humankind as sinful and unable to do anything good, which explains why the ideal images are impossible to meet and why the participants felt not good enough. Richard said:

> If you are a Christian, you want to do things right. For God and that, and this is actually always impossible, sort of, because you always do it wrong. Um, so yes, that s- that is all not that positive, but yes, I also know of, eh, that God does not expect you to do everything right. He knows you are sinful, but yes, I think for a long time I had the idea of "I don't do things right."

That those beliefs about the sinful state of humankind were very persistent and could result in a negative self-perception is exemplified by Lauren, who reported:

> Right and wrong, and, and sins, and that is so much, terribly emphasized that that everyone is so bad. And if you are, like, very sensitive to that. I have been very sensitive to that in the past of, "yes, I am not worth anything, and you see, I'm super bad and stuff." That still influences me now.

The beliefs about humankind are reflected in the narrated beliefs about conversion as something very difficult and almost unattainable considering the sinful human state. This implies that people are never good enough for conversion and can only obtain salvation by a gracious act of God. Lois mentioned that within strictly Reformed contexts, they claim

> that it is very difficult to become converted, like, to, to really, eh, to come to faith, like. And that there are only a few who, eh, yes, who may really belong to God, like. . . . a bit that strict [way], or that narrow, or something in that.

In this regard, Lois reported, regarding the beliefs about conversion that were transmitted to her, "you can't just have a personal relationship with God, say; first, several things need to happen. You must be very sad about your sins, and then you have to hope that God will forgive you and accept you." Like with ideal images, there is a focus on "the right" way, in this regard on the right way towards conversion. That much depends on conversion is demonstrated by Tobias: "Yes, it is very difficult to become converted, and if you do not become converted, then you go to hell and then you burn forever." He adds: "As a child, you really visualize that and you don't want that."

We also found, as Tobias illustrates, that beliefs about humankind and conversion cannot be considered in isolation from beliefs about eternity and God. Many participants referred to beliefs about eternity, including that people either go to heaven or hell, and God decides people's destiny. We observed that God was perceived by participants as an "angry" God or a "strict God" who judges people. All those beliefs, in the light of the ideal images and the conforming focus on right and wrong, echo a black-and-white worldview that is transmitted to participants: things are either right or wrong, and people go to either heaven or hell.

More importantly, these beliefs appear to generate feelings of fear. We found that various participants experienced this fear, implying the fear of going to hell or of the final judgment and the second coming of Jesus when the participants' ultimate fate would be determined. Interestingly, this fear occurred in the stories of participants with various current commitments. Susanna, who currently is committed to trusting God but who does not identify with strict Reformedness anymore, stated: "I can be very afraid . . . that I also think, 'Yes, but what if I, my parents were right? And if I have the wrong perception, and if I have not read the Bible properly.'" And a participant who currently reconciles faith with a same-sex relationship said:

> . . . if I am not doing the right thing and then I will not go to heaven. In the end, you know, heaven and hell. And then I end up in the wrong place. I am always very afraid that I am accidentally completely wrong and that really gets to me. I'll find that I prefer not to think about that.

Similar to the persistence of feelings of not being good enough, these related feelings of fear were quite persistent in participants' lives. Adrian, who currently is committed to self, said: "Yes, t- that is always in, that fear. It remains, it will remain for the rest of your life. There is always a kind of voice in your mind."

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we presented how the theme not being good enough played a role in the life story accounts about religious identity development of emerging adults with a strictly Reformed upbringing. We presented that the theme is strongly connected to ideal images and beliefs, with accompanying feelings of fear, guilt, and rejection, stemming from the strictly Reformed contexts in which the participants were raised. As such, we assert that the not-being-good-enough theme exemplifies how our population's religious identity development is shaped by their strictly Reformed upbringing. In this regard, Snodgrass (2018) argued that "identity is a narrative construct, a story, part given and part chosen but all shaping us. . . . We are shaped by our families of origin, opportunities, education, traumas, failures, successes and celebrations" (p. 12).

We observed that studies into (orthodox or conservative) Christians report similar feelings to that of not being good enough, strengthened by underlying beliefs in human sinfulness and a punishing God, such as feelings of guilt (Eurelings-Bontekoe et al., 2005; Strhan, 2019), fear of sin and God (Abrahamowitz et al., 2002), anxiety (Schaap-Jonker, 2018), and a poor sense of self-liking and of one's competence (Greenway et al., 2003). Interestingly, Schaap-Jonker (2018), in line with our findings, assumes a relationship between religious orthodoxy, a feeling of anxiety towards God, and black-and-white thinking. Likewise, we observed that the more theoretical concept of shame and its relationship with religion bears similarities to what we found about these experiences in our study. Shame involves a perception of oneself as defective due to a failure to meet ideal standards, reflected in our findings. In this context, Patterson (2000) referred to letters he received from English Christians from various dominations about the shame they feel. One of these evangelical Anglican-raised Christians wrote: "My experience of shame was a general feeling of not feeling good enough, always needing approval, feeling guilty, ugly awkward, stupid bad, and having to be good" (p. 272). Likewise, the antecedents of shame referred to in the literature seem similar to what we found about transmitted ideal images and beliefs. Park (2016), for example, maintained that views of human depravity and a harsh God and expectations concerning moral perfection, as part of religious socialization by families and religious leaders, strengthen feelings of shame. Accordingly, Patterson (2000) stated, referring to Smedes (1993), that churches can contribute to shame by "perfectionism, emphasizing duty and the unworthiness of human beings, and failing to provide a sense of affirmation and acceptance" (p. 211). In light of these similarities, the study's findings support empirical and theoretical

reflections on the relationship between feelings like not being good enough, shame, and religion.

We found that in participants' life story accounts, feelings of not being good enough were more frequently associated with God than with the religious environment. Thus, the not-being-good-enough theme underlines the tridirectional relationship in religious identity development we suggested in our systematic literature review study (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019). This tridirectionality implies that not only the person and the context are involved, but that a transcending factor, like God, is perceived to be involved as well. We propose that the contribution of transcendence to not-good-enough experiences is mediated by the presented ideal images and beliefs. These are transmitted mainly by educators in families, churches, and schools. Thus, we recommend that educators involved in religious socialization reflect not only on the contents they transmit and the expectations they have but also on how these might shape young people's sense of self. This reflection is important, since the line between feelings of not being good enough for God and believers within strictly Reformed contexts on the one hand, and a negative religious self-perception on the other hand, might be a thin one (Park, 2016). Our finding that several participants internalized the idea of not being good enough, against their will, as a voice in the back of their head might point in that direction. Under the influence of personal characteristics, high standards set in society, and social expectations displayed on social media, a negative religious self-perception presumably might result in overall low self-esteem. Also, we recommend that educators consider how they could help young people deal with ambivalent feelings of not being good enough.

Based on our findings, we argue that feelings of not being good enough and related ideal images and beliefs can substantially impact emerging adults' religious identity development for two reasons. The first reason is that the ideal images and the conforming focus on right and wrong might generate a "vacuum." The ideal images need to be met; however, they are so perfect that participants experience them as impossible to meet in daily life. In addition, because of the belief in human sinfulness, it is impossible to comply with the ideal images in the first place. In this regard, Patterson (2000) stated that this vacuum "may freeze them into a state where they feel like inadequate frauds or hypocrites because of the perceived, unbridgeable gap between what is and what 'ought' to be" (p. 266).

In comparison to other studies into orthodox religious populations, we propose that this vacuum is typical for our strictly Reformed population. This is because studies into evangelical or Pentecostal adult Christians (Eurelings-Bontekoe et al., 2005; Strhan, 2019), Latter-day Saint adolescents (Sanders et al., 2015), and Roman Catholics (Walinga et al., 2005) seem to indicate that these groups hold different beliefs, including God concepts, and have different experiences. There is, for example, more emphasis on the loving and supporting character of God and the possibility of a personal relationship with God, which shape a person's sense of self positively. God is perceived as one who loves people. For the non-strictly-Reformed populations, there appears to be a

way out when people feel not good enough: through rituals and confession, as in the Roman Catholic tradition (Walinga et al., 2005), or through Jesus's death as a release, redemption, and atonement for sinners (Strhan, 2019). Strhan (2019) compares, in this regard, Calvinists—a label that also applies to the strictly Reformeds—and conservative Evangelicals. She maintains that "unlike Calvinist theology, there is [for conservative Evangelicals] a doctrine of assurance, and church members—if they doubt their salvation—are taught to 'return to the cross' to feel assured of God's forgiveness" (p. 163). The study contributes to the existing literature on feelings of falling short within Christian populations by elaborating on this theme from the unique perspective of a population of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands.

The second reason is that feelings of not being good enough might prevent youth from exploration and exercising agency, which is considered crucial for religious identity development (Barrow et al., 2020; Hemming & Madge, 2012). They may feel not good enough when exploring alternative beliefs and practices, and when they make choices in their religious identity development that are different from what they are expected to choose (Assor et al., 2005). The study of Barrow, Dollahite and Marks (2020) revealed that parents honored the agency of children by respecting and accepting their religious views and choices. This finding aligns with our finding from an earlier study on contextual influences in religious identity development (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2021d). We found that our population of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults considered it important that they, in this process, are accepted as they are and not judged because of their beliefs and practices. We, however, propose that the feelings of not being good enough presented in this study are the opposite of feelings of being accepted and respected. Thus, we recommend that educators and practitioners both within strictly religious contexts and beyond reflect on the kind of (religious socialization) climate they create: an acceptance and affirmation environment or an atmosphere of condemnation and judgment.

This study contributes to the existing knowledge about strictly religious-raised populations and their religious identity development by shedding light on the specific beliefs and ideal images that have implications for the past and present religious self-perception of emerging adults. In this way, the study may give relevant insights for researchers and professionals interested in feelings of falling short and being imperfect, whether or not religiously motivated, within other contexts and populations. We acknowledge that the findings of our study are limited by our sample size of 18 participants. However, based on the saliency of this theme, even in our small research population, we suspect that the theme of not being good enough will lead to recognition among other strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults.

Also, we acknowledge that the findings are limited by the context our participants grew up in, as it is rather specific, considering the strict Reformed theology and the conforming beliefs and practices. Thus, it would be interesting to investigate the relationship between negative religious self-perceptions and religious beliefs and socialization practices within other religions or Christian dominations. Also, it would

be relevant for future researchers to explore how, in religious identity development, specific socialization practices and resulting feelings of not being good enough (or similar feelings) interact with personal characteristics (cf. Greenway et al., 2003; Künkler et al., 2020) and participants' relationships with their parents (cf. Dickie et al., 2006), as well as feelings of not being good enough stemming from social-cultural expectations in society. Likewise, it is recommended that future researchers explore in more detail how feelings of not being good enough, with underlying beliefs and ideal images, shape youth' in their religious identity development. Finally, future work should focus on how feelings of not being good enough can be overcome or dealt with so that "negative experiences can help to develop a more mature faith and a more mature personality" (Künkler et al., 2020, p. 12).

7

Conclusion and discussion

Conclusion

The central question that guided my research project was the following: How can the religious identity development of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands be described and interpreted? The answer to this question is that the results of this research show that the religious identity development of these emerging adults is a dynamic developmental path that, notwithstanding a mono-religious character, takes a variety of directions both within and outside the Christian faith. The findings concerning participants' current commitments illustrate this. Also, the population's religious identity development can be interpreted as a process highly influenced and shaped by (experiences with) their strictly Reformed upbringing, where the feeling of not being good enough seems to be a long-lasting result of this influence. This is also exemplified by the findings concerning participants' past exploration processes and perceptions of contextual influences.

To answer the central question of this research project, I reviewed the existing literature on religious identity development within strictly religious populations, and this review functioned as a theoretical framework. It also served as a direction indicator for the future study of religious identity development within a strictly religious population by addressing key concerns and relevant themes. Second, I investigated participants' narrative accounts of essential processes in religious identity development: current commitments, past explorations, and contextual influences.

My systematic literature review study (see Chapter 3) was guided by the following question: How do existing studies of strictly religious adolescents conceptualize and investigate their religious identity and religious identity development, and on what should future researchers focus to gain a better understanding of this population? This study made clear that there is little empirical and theoretical research into religious identity development within strictly religious populations, which underlined the need for my empirical study into a strictly Reformed-raised population. The study also made clear that the included studies were mainly rooted in the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory tradition, diverse in methodology (quantitative, qualitative, theoretical, or a combination) and weak in conceptualizations of religious identity and religious identity development. Therefore, in subsection 2 of this chapter, I elaborated on my conceptualizations. The review study's first contribution is that it organizes and discusses the literature on religious identity development within a strictly religious youth population. Another contribution is that it points to the uniqueness of the religious identity domain because of a perceived tridirectional relationship between the individual, the context, and a transcendent dimension. My finding that participants mainly felt not good enough for God (see Chapter 7) confirmed this supposition. The review study's third contribution is that it points to a conceptual weakness and identifies three themes that appeared important for the study of religious identity development within strictly religious populations: contextual influence, exploration and commitment, and autonomy and choice. As I stated before, these themes determined the focus of

my empirical study, were the subjects of empirical research questions addressed in chapters 4 to 6 of this dissertation, and were reflected on in the discussion of findings (see Chapter 8).

My analysis of participants' current religious identity commitments in Chapter 4 was guided by the following sub-question: What are the religious identity commitments of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands? I presented and illustrated four types of commitments that reflect the variation and diffuseness in the meaning of religion in their lives and identities: a commitment to trusting God, a commitment to self, a commitment to a rational belief in God, and a commitment to not knowing yet. These commitments show how young people negotiated their upbringing by assimilating, adapting, or rejecting what was transmitted in their strictly Reformed socialization. Each commitment reflects certain beliefs, practices, values, experiences, and attitudes or demonstrates the absence of some of these, which applies to self-commitment and not-knowing-yet commitment. As such, the commitments underline how religion is understood in this study as a multidimensional concept whereby the transcendent and the immanent interact (see Chapter 1). My investigation of religious identity commitments provides insights into the provisional and current outcomes of the religious identity developmental pathways of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults' development. It thereby indicates the various directions such pathways can take, although all participants were generally socialized in the same way. In addition, it takes the empirical study of religious commitment further because, as I stated, visual tools are valuable for exploring religious identity commitments. Likewise, I noted that analyzing the *what* of participants' commitments helps identify and characterize commitments in terms of various aspects, such as the content (beliefs, practices, values, attitudes, and experiences), objects, and motivations.

In Chapter 5, I investigated the question: How did strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands explore their religious identities, and how did they experience that exploration? For all participants, explorations were part of their religious identity development path: they asked questions, and they explored alternatives or rebelled, indicating that they, in one way or another, tried to find their own way in their religious identity development. I observed that participants asked various types of questions, such as about the strictly Reformed interpretation of the faith, their own religious identity, and the Christian faith. Also, I observed that participants explored alternative Christian ways of believing, other denominations and religious meetings, or other religions. Lastly, I observed that participants displayed behavior that, within the strictly Reformed tradition, is disallowed or undesirable.

The investigation of exploration processes provides insights into various manifestations of those processes within a population that is more or less socialized in the same way. These manifestations mirror styles of exploration within other studies on (religious) identity development (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Luyckx et al., 2006; Visser-Vogel, 2015). However, I argue that the type of questions participants asked, their degree of exploration, their limited openness to alternatives, and their reported

negative experiences with exploration could be considered unique for this population (see Chapter 5). In this way, the findings illuminate how participants' explorations are determined and shaped by the strictly Reformed context. The investigation of exploration processes also provides insights into how these are related to the current commitments of a population with a strictly Reformed upbringing. This relationship confirms that commitment and exploration processes are dynamic and interrelated, and this is underlined by my refined conceptualization of religious identity development (see Chapter 8).

Chapter 6 elaborated on contextual influences in religious identity development. In this chapter, I explored the following question: Which contextual factors were, according to strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults, influential on their religious identity development, and how do they value and characterize this influence? Various contextual factors were considered influential, such as family and friends, peers, life events, and Christian youth groups and activities. Moreover, what people actually do seemed to matter most. People in the participants' sphere of influence were considered to positively influence religious identity development when they were accepting, inspiring, exemplary, somehow similar to participants, and when they engaged in dialogue with them and provided other perspectives. However, people were considered to negatively influence this process when they acted hypocritically, limited participants in doing what they wanted, and focused on right and wrong. My investigation of contextual influences shows what strictly Reformed-raised children and young people need from others to receive support in their religious identity development. This need can be characterized as a need to obtain agency, which reflects the importance of agency as described in my conceptual framework (see Chapter 1) and the findings of my systematic literature review study (see Chapter 3). My investigation also points at the challenge for youth and educators to exercise or provide agency on the one hand and to depend on the traditional frameworks on the other.

In Chapter 7, I explored a surprisingly dominant theme in my data: that participants feel not good enough for God and others. My investigation was guided by the question, How can feelings of not being good enough, which emerged in the life stories of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands, be explained in relation to their upbringing? I found that not-good-enough feelings related to specific beliefs and ideal images transmitted to participants in their strictly Reformed upbringing. Moreover, I found that the feelings related to an experienced focus on right and wrong and a transmitted black-or-white worldview. The presence and prominence of such feelings in almost all life stories, including the life stories of the participants who distanced themselves from the faith, show the profound effect of these beliefs, ideal images, foci, and worldviews. I already addressed some of these aspects of a strictly Reformed upbringing in other chapters,[26] but in Chapter 8, these aspects are interwoven into the not-good-enough theme. The findings show that there is a vertical line of influence

26 See chapters 5, 6, and 7.

beyond the horizontal line represented by people who influenced participants in their religious identity development. The vertical line is represented by a God who is to be remote and judging, whose influence appeared significant. The strictly Reformed influential people do not only mediate such perceptions of God in their socialization practices; they also mediate the potentially serious consequences of not being good enough for God.

A contribution of my investigation of the not-good-enough theme is that it provides insights into a prominent pattern in the religious identity development life stories of the research population. Furthermore, it provides insights into how these feelings are related to a strictly Reformed upbringing and what the possible implications are for the religious identity development path of young people.

Discussion

In the following sections, I first present the societal, theoretical, and practical implications of this research project's findings. I discuss popular images of strictly Reformed-raised youth considering the findings, bring the findings in dialogue with the literature on (religious) identity development, and discuss participants' experiences with a strictly Reformed upbringing. Second, I discuss conceptualizations of religious identity, religious identity development, and autonomy. Finally, I provide directions for empirical research methodology.

Competing with popular images of youth who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts: societal implications

Existing images

In Dutch society, images of strictly Reformed-raised youth are present that reflect explicit and implicit prejudices. These images generally suggest that young people grow up in an isolated environment and are indoctrinated and manipulated with outdated beliefs and practices that contradict the postmodern and pluralist society (Truijens, 2020; van Roosmalen, 2020). These images also suggest that strictly Reformed educators pour youth into a strictly religious socialization mold with less or no agency for children and young people. This results in the popular construction of a homogeneous group of strictly Reformed people who unquestioningly take over what was transmitted to them (Engelbart, 2020). Likewise, I observed that among the strictly Reformeds, there are ideal images of how young people should develop their religious identity (see Chapter 7) and critical perceptions of how they negotiate their religious upbringing with secular influences. For example, there is a conception that currently strictly Reformed young people consider dogma meaningless, delight in secular media, and do not accept the absolute authority of the Bible (Klaasse, 2020). Thus, in both the public sphere and in strictly Reformed contexts, people tense up because of their images of growing up

in strictly Reformed contexts within a postmodern and pluralist society. They want to protect young people in such contexts from being indoctrinated or wish to prevent these youngsters from becoming secularized.

A more detailed, nuanced, and evidence-based picture

Considering these various images, this study's results into the religious identity development of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults provide a more detailed, nuanced, and evidence-based picture. First, although the participants generally had a relatively protected upbringing, this upbringing did not prevent them from finding their own way. This is apparent in the variation in religious identity commitments I found and these commitments' contents (see Chapter 4). The findings show that most of the participants negotiated the beliefs and practices transmitted to them. The beliefs, practices, ideal images, worldviews, and foci that are part of participants' current commitments point to (slightly) other ways of believing and living than the way in which they were brought up (see chapters 4–6). This is especially evident in the participants' stories with a commitment to self: they left the faith and now determine for themselves what to think and how to live (see Chapter 4). Also, this is evident in the beliefs of participants committed to trusting God, since the findings indicate a shift in their beliefs about God.

These participants, who call themselves either strictly Reformed or non-strictly Reformed, perceive God as a caring being they could relate to and who is directly involved with their lives. This perception is at odds with a transmitted and reported perception of a remote and judging God (see chapters 4 and 7). Likewise, participants' appreciation of openness to other perspectives in processes of religious identity development seems to conflict with perceptions of the strictly Reformed interpretation as the only exclusivist truth (see chapters 6 and 7). Furthermore, this study's finding that all participants explored in their religious development process, although the degree and form of their exploration differed, can be interpreted as an expression of participants' finding their own way in their religious identity development (see Chapter 5). To a greater or lesser extent, they all doubted the motivation for the strictly Reformed beliefs and practices, explored beliefs and practices (slightly) different from the strictly Reformed interpretation, or rebelled against the strictly Reformed beliefs and practices. Thus, in various ways, the strictly Reformed-raised population demonstrated agency in their religious identity development, although regularly on a small scale, except for those who left the faith. As such, the findings compete with existing images about strictly Reformed educational contexts as restricting children and youngsters in finding their own way. Also, they compete with Stark and Finke (2000), who argue that when people are surrounded by others with "high levels of commitments . . . who express their confidence that their religion is true and effective" (p. 147), they tend to conform to the commitments of these others.

Moreover, these findings confirm movement across the strictly Reformeds, as Schinkelshoek (2017) suggests. As mentioned in Chapter 1, he speaks about a

"refolution" and "cracks" in the strictly Reformed pillar because youth increasingly refuse to be determined by the community when it comes to beliefs and practices. Based on my findings, I think religiosity in strictly Reformed-raised populations indeed changes as it is passed down across generations, which I questioned in Chapter 1. This lends support to Bengtson et al.'s (2013) observation that Millennials "espouse a much wider range of religious perspectives than their predecessors" (p. 46). The findings suggest that this change involves most of the participants currently considering the Christian faith or religion more important than the strictly Reformed tradition and interpretation of the faith. Under the influence of people who provided them with other perspectives, they realized that the strictly Reformed interpretation of the faith is not the only correct interpretation and that there are other options beyond this interpretation and the Christian faith (see Chapter 6). In this regard, Pons-de Wit (2020a, 2020c) and Roeland et al. (2010) speak about religious purification, implying that people tend to focus on the core principles of the tradition—the foundations—instead of side issues such as specific practices which they relativize. Consequently, people deepen and strengthen their commitments and focus more on their personal relationship with God (cf. Wisse, 2020). From a strictly Reformed perspective, this change in focus might be perceived as a loss. However, from the perspective of Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory, I think that through purification, prompted by the provision of other perspectives, youth develop a more internalized and authentic commitment (cf. Pons-de Wit, 2020a).

Second, based on my findings, I propose that my population appears not very different from fellow Millennial emerging adults who are not strictly religiously raised. As I stated in Chapter 4, this is, in the first place, reflected in the self-commitment of several participants. The participants with this commitment are self-focused, seek fun, cling to experiences, and insist on "making their own choices about what to believe and what to value" (Arnett, 2015, p. 242; Niemelä, 2015; Perrin, 2020). The values of acceptance and freedom that the self-committed participants hold are typical for Millennials as well (see Chapter 4). These observations might imply that only those participants who distanced from the strictly Reformed tradition and the Christian faith could be considered typical Millennials. However, participants with other commitments also have characteristics of Millennials. I argue that the commonalities between the values of the research population and Millennials indicate that the research population has not remained isolated from the world outside the strictly Reformed contexts, as is often suggested.

Chapter 4, about current religious identity commitments, for example, made clear that several participants highly valued freedom and acceptance and that other participants considered their personal relationship with God to be important. Chapter 6, about contextual influences, made clear that most participants valued acceptance, authenticity as opposed to hypocrisy, and freedom as opposed to limitation as positive influences in religious identity development. Also, they appreciated a broad perspective, as opposed to a focus on right and wrong. These findings accord with those of other studies. Pons-de Wit (2020a), who studied both Millennial and Generation X believers,

atheists, and people identifying as spiritual, found that both believers and those who left the faith sought authenticity among role models, implying congruence in teaching and practice. Bengtson et al. (2013) observe, in this regard, that the stories of Millennials they interviewed about faith and religion reflect "open-mindedness and appreciation for diversity" (p. 49). Likewise, Beekers (2014) maintains, reflecting on the religiosity of observant Dutch Muslims and Christians, that a "focus on personal conviction and on authenticity (being a 'true' or 'sincere' believer) can be seen as a particular expression of widely shared concerns with authenticity in Western societies" (p. 90).

The picture that my study paints of strictly Reformed-raised youth led me to conclude that my population was not entirely subjected to what educators and other influential people transmitted to them. The participants found, and find, their own way in their religious identity development, either along the lines of the strictly Reformed interpretation of the faith or apart from this interpretation or the Christian faith. I believe that this study's picture will be beneficial in ongoing discussions about strictly religious formation practices in the Netherlands and beyond, for example, about the legitimacy of strictly Reformed or religious schools. Nevertheless, further research is needed to explore how educators can support this agency. This is because the study shows that agency manifestations, such as exploration, were perceived as problematic by strictly Reformeds and that participants felt limited in their beliefs and practices (see chapters 5 and 6). Considering these participants' experiences, I also recommend that future researchers explore to what extent the demonstration of agency among young people in strictly Reformed or religious contexts relies on personal characteristics.

In dialogue with the literature on (religious) identity development: theoretical implications

Ideal, healthy, and desirable religious identity development

As public opinion and strictly Reformeds themselves do, the literature as discussed in this study presents images of ideal, healthy, and desirable (religious) identity development processes. My systematic literature review (see Chapter 3) revealed a normative position in studies on strictly religious youth populations' religious identity development. This position involves an ideal image of religious identity development as a process in which young people make an intrinsically motivated, self-chosen commitment. Part of this process is that they are able to explore actively, including deep and critical reflections on their beliefs and practices. Also, this process involves that youth can determine the directions of their developmental path independently and can choose from a variety of "ideological options" (Armet, 2009, p. 281). Potentially influential people can play an essential role in facilitating and supporting this exploration and agency (Assor et al., 2005; Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014; Schachter & Ventura, 2008; Shepherd, 2010).

Accordingly, Hemming and Madge (2012) state that "agency is not a straightforward issue because there may well be variation in the extent to which children and young people exercise agency, or indeed are expected to exercise agency by their cultural or

religious group" (p. 44). Interestingly, the ideal image in the literature about religious identity development precludes a path in which youth unconsciously adopt the beliefs and practices of their upbringing, resulting in an ascribed, assigned, or external commitment (Armet, 2009; Fisherman, 2016; Peek, 2005). This raises the question of whether and to what extent the (ideal images in the) literature appropriately reflects the context of the research population under study, implying that they displayed healthy religious identity development and made an authentic and agentic commitment.

Discussing participants' commitments and explorations

As stated before, I propose that participants' current commitments and the presence of exploration processes in their religious identity development indicate their ownership or agency and that they are not just passive recipients of religious socialization. Nevertheless, in light of the ideal image of healthy and desirable religious identity development, I think it is necessary to look at those commitments and explorations. In particular, it is interesting to discuss the participants committed to a rational belief in God, and who perceive themselves as strictly Reformed and believe in God, yet they do not perceive themselves as converted Christians.[27] What stands out from their stories is that most of them, compared to other participants, committed to beliefs and practices closest to their upbringing. I observed that participants' life story accounts with this commitment echo beliefs about human depravity, sovereign grace, a remote God, and the need for personal conversion.

One might conclude that these specific participants do not display healthy religious identity development because they mirror the beliefs and practices of their upbringing. I, however, believe that this is an unnuanced conclusion. The analysis of participants' commitments did not confirm that they made an ascribed, assigned, or foreclosed commitment instead of a self-chosen commitment (cf. Armet, 2009; Clements, 2020; Marcia, 1966; Peek, 2005). However, the question remains of whether finding one's own way conforms to strictly Reformed expectations, and ideal images might then be a deliberate and agentic own choice instead of a choice motivated by the environment and circumstances. To answer this question, it could be important to consider participants' motivation for their commitment. What becomes clear is that most of the participants who are committed to rational belief perform their religious practices because those practices are perceived as means by which they might obtain salvation and become converted. As such, their commitment seems more externally motivated and thus less healthy than a more internalized commitment (Armet, 2009).

Concerning the exploration process of the strictly Reformed participants committed to rational belief, they explored the least compared to other participants. When they explored, their exploration remained limited and narrow. For example, they mainly

27 In chapter 4, I indicated that these participants represent the first manifestation of a commitment to rational belief in God. The main difference between this manifestation and the second manifestation was that participants had different perceptions of God and humankind.

asked questions to understand the strictly Reformed interpretation of the faith and thereby seek confirmation of the beliefs and practices transmitted to them. Also, they hardly explored alternatives and considered their playing computer games and listening to pop music to be forms of rebellion. Since these activities are generally not allowed, these participants' perceptions of their rebellion reflect a strictly Reformed black-or-white perception of what is good and not good to do. Again, the question arises of whether this limited and narrow exploration contributes to healthy religious identity development. I propose that, although superficial, their exploration shows at least that they somehow question the strictly Reformed interpretation of the faith and not that they unquestioningly take over what was transmitted to them. In this regard, Loveland (2016) states that "many of those who remain in one tradition their entire lives will experience changes in religious identity salience and meaning" (p. 294). Thus, staying in the same tradition over the years, like the participants committed to rational belief, does not imply that someone's religious identity commitment remains precisely the same. I assume that participants' explorations contribute to these changes in the salience and meaning of their religious identity commitments.

In the light of the specific contexts in which my participants grew up, I believe that every manifestation of exploration, although limited and narrow, is meaningful to our understanding of this under-researched population and how exploration processes unfold (Kunnen & Metz, 2015). This is because explorations and demonstrations of agency are highly context dependent, and thus future researchers should take cultural and religious contexts into account in their investigation of processes of choice and independent decision-making in identity development. In this way, limited and narrow explorations, like small-scale demonstrations of agency, would not be overlooked. Qualitative methods suit, in my opinion, the study of exploration processes, since "less is known about the nature of the exploration itself" (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009, p. 235). Future research is also needed on how personal characteristics, alongside contextual influences, affect exploring and exercising agency (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009).

Chapter 3 mentioned that there might be little incentive for demonstrating exploration and agency for those growing up in a highly religious, demanding, and community-oriented environment, especially when contrasting views are absent. Besides, when one feels comfortable and safe in this environment, which several participants reported, there might be less reason to explore. Moreover, participants' exploration experiences indicate that exploration was not always stimulated or desired and that educators, according to participants, could not provide a satisfying response to questions. Although the findings show that participants in one way or another demonstrated agency in religious identity development, this is not to say that they were provided with adequate space to exercise agency. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the extent to which participants were stimulated and facilitated in their exploration and in finding their own way in religious identity development.

Layton et al. (2012) maintain that it is "vital to understand how essential supporting autonomy and openness in communication are for facilitating healthy" (p. 182) religious

identity exploration. The participants under study in this research project were generally raised with the worldview that there is one truth and that things are either right or wrong. They were also raised with ideal images of a good or real (strictly Reformed) Christian and a way to become converted. Thus, a path that slightly differs from what is perceived as ideal and as the truth appears not possible or acceptable. In my interpretation, such an environment left little room for questioning, broadening one's perspective, and trying out new things to find their own way. This is supported by participants' stories about positive and negative influences in their religious identity development. Chapter 6 presented that participants valued it negatively when they were limited and experienced a focus on right and wrong. I concluded that the findings about these influences reflect a plea for an agency-stimulating environment characterized by acceptance, conversations based on equivalence, and the provision of other perspectives.

Discussing participants' experiences with a strictly Reformed upbringing: practical implications

An agency-stimulating environment

Having discussed to what extent the research population mirrored the ideal image of religious identity development and was stimulated and facilitated in exploration and finding its own way, I think my study points, in this regard, at two other topics for discussion. First, considering the plea for an agency-stimulating environment in these data, it is questionable whether strictly Reformed parents and other influential people consider it desirable for children and youngsters to explore and make their *own* choices in their religious identity development. This is because exploration and independent decision-making might pave the way for youth to reject their upbringing's beliefs and practices. According to Fisherman (2002), rebellion is "necessary to crystallization of adult faith" (p. 64) because youth are encouraged to reflect on their beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, this rebellious behavior is often "perceived by parents and teachers as negative and as inhibiting the development of faith" (p. 64). Interestingly, Bengtson et al. (2013) found that in highly religious families, the "children who experienced freedom of choice were likely to follow their parents' religious example" (p. 197). Also, they found that many young adults who rejected the beliefs and practices of their upbringing, those who chose another religion or who left the faith, returned to the faith. Characteristic of these young adults' parents is that they "waited, were open and accepting, and did not push" (p. 197). These findings indicate that allowing young people to find their own way contributes to their religious continuity and returning to the faith, instead of rejecting their religious upbringing and the faith. Bengtson et al. (2013) maintain that "acceptance and affirmation, rather than judgement and preaching, are the keys" (p. 197) to supporting young people in their search for their own commitment.

Chapter 6 concluded that creating an agency-stimulating environment demands potentially influential people who need to balance between providing agency and upholding the strictly Reformed tradition. I will conclude that it also requires that influential people explore their own religious identity commitment and reflect on how they are shaped by their (religious) upbringing and their current beliefs and practices. I believe that in this way, influential people can be role models in religious identity development who stand next to young people and with whom they can identify. Thereby, open and honest communication is crucial, implying that young people are taken seriously as conversation partners and can freely ask their questions and share their doubts and concerns. Also, this communication should involve that when educators are confronted with (difficult) questions, they provide rationales for beliefs and practices and demonstrate "the intrinsic value of engagement in religious practices" (Assor et al., 2005, p. 117). Such communication leaves no room for responses like "we do or believe this because we are used to it" (see Chapter 5). I propose that when educators realize they do not have proper answers, they should admit they do not know and, together with youngsters, search for answers. I believe that a valuable, bidirectional relationship then develops whereby influential people contribute to youth religious identity development and vice versa (Özdikmenli-Demir & Şahin-Kütük, 2012).

Feelings of being not good enough

Second, an important observation of a remarkable result to emerge from the data is that participants felt or feel not good enough for God and (religious) others, independent of the direction of their religious identity development pathways (see Chapter 7). Chapter 7 discussed this unexpected finding in light of the literature on the positive and more ambivalent influences of religion on an individual's identity and self-perception. I found that feeling not good enough, in the studied population, is strongly related to strictly Reformed beliefs and ideal images, a focus on right and wrong, and a black-or-white worldview. At first glance, one might conclude that participants' religious socialization was successful. Whether currently strictly Reformed, Christian, or non-Christian, almost all participants internalized the strictly Reformed ideal images of real Christians and the beliefs about humankind, God, and conversion involving a black-or-white worldview. However, as I concluded in Chapter 7, such feelings might hinder young people in exploring and taking ownership of their religious identity development, although participants have longed for acceptance (see Chapter 6). Likewise, feelings of not being good enough might generate a vacuum of inadequacy and impossibilities for which there is no way out that is within young people's reach (see Chapter 7).

I will add to these conclusions that the black-or-white worldview underlying feelings of not being good enough had a significant influence on the direction of the participants' religious identity development path. This is because I found that the participants with a self-commitment, and who had salient, fundamental questions about Christianity, made black-or-white decisions. They chose between the strictly Reformed interpretation of the faith or being non-Christian (see Chapter 4). When

they, for example, concluded that it could not be that God created everything in six days, then they felt that not only the strictly Reformed interpretation is wrong but that the whole Christian faith is a farce, since they were raised with the idea that the strictly Reformed interpretation is the right interpretation of the Christian faith. There thus seems to be nothing in between—for example, a commitment whereby someone identifies as Christian but does not perceive the Bible as the infallible Word of God anymore. Oliver, who committed to the Jehovah's Witnesses, seems to be an exception. However, in the interviews, he also expressed a black-or-white worldview: that the doctrines and lifestyles of the Jehovah's Witnesses are the only truth. Considering the persistence of the transmitted black-or-white worldview, I believe it is essential that strictly Reformed educators are aware of the consequences of this worldview.

I will add to these conclusions that, without getting involved in a discussion about the theological adequacy of beliefs and their psychological functionality, it is important that strictly Reformed educators consider what they emphasize in religious socialization (Counts, 1973; van Deusen Hunsinger, 1995). In this regard, it is relevant to look at the literature within strictly Reformed environments on faith formation and education. For example, Koelman, a minister and representative of the *Nadere Reformatie*, wrote a book that is perceived as a standard work on Christian pedagogics: *De plichten der ouders* (1679, 2016; in English: *The Duties of Parents*). In this work, he provides theological and practical guidelines for Christian parents. What stands out is that he emphasizes the sinful nature of children and youth and the consequences of living a life apart from God, and he prescribes how young people should and should not live. At the same time, Koelman writes several pages about God's promises and characteristics to which children may hold. He advises parents to help them read and learn these.

Interestingly, the first three promises he refers to concern reconciliation with God, the forgiveness of sins, and liberation from the power of hell. Likewise, the 120 characteristics of God to which Koelman refers start with the statement that "God is the Lord Who is merciful, gracious, patient and abundant in goodness and truth" (p. 115). A more recent book on strictly Reformed or Christian formation is, for example, Beeke's (2011) book *Parenting by God's Promises*, translated to Dutch in 2013. In this book on parenting, Beeke maintains, referring to the Dutch Reformed "Form for the Administration of Baptism," that parents need to acknowledge that children are sinners, just like parents themselves are. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that parents "may raise children with a strong hope based on the covenant promises of God" (p. xv). Parents should also speak about "Christ, His majestic glory, His love for sinners, His power to save, and His willingness to receive all who come to Him" (Beeke, 2011, p. 60). Considering these works on strictly Reformed formation practices, there seems to be a discrepancy between what educators should strive for, according to Koelman and Beeke, and what they do, as experienced by the research population. The research project shows that participants experienced an emphasis on human sinfulness, the harsh and judging side of God, and what is good and not good to think and do, resulting in feelings of guilt, fear, and not being good enough (see Chapter 7). Based

on these findings, I assume that God's promises, rooted in the covenant of grace, and more positive characteristics of God seem to have played a subordinate role. I thus believe that a practical implication of this research project might be that strictly Reformed educators look at the theologies they transmit and consider how they can balance these. Overall, I believe it is relevant for educators to consider whether they create an acceptance and affirmation environment of hope in religious socialization or an atmosphere of condemnation and judgment (see Chapter 7).

Religious identity, religious identity development, and autonomy revisited

In chapters 1 and 2, I elaborated on my conceptualizations of religious identity and religious identity development. However, my empirical research study made clear that some conceptualizations need to be reflected upon, refined, adjusted, and complemented. First, regarding religious identity, my study into religious identity commitments revealed that the concepts of *religious identity* and *religious identity commitment* seem to be almost similar because both concern beliefs and practices (see Chapter 4). This study thus requires that I make a clearer distinction between these concepts. I, therefore, assume that it is better to perceive religious identity as becoming concrete in a religious identity commitment and processes of exploration[28]. In line with this, I assume that it better to perceive commitment instead of religious identity as comprising beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, I hold on to my conceptualization of religious identity as one of the various identity domains that together constitute a person's identity.

The religious identity domain is important to identity because it offers a framework for meaning-making and (moral) behavior (Armet, 2009). My study into religious identity commitment also revealed that participants' commitment involved aspects that were not contained in my initial definition, such as the object (to what they are committed) and motivations of commitments. Therefore, I propose a refined definition of religious identity commitment as a dedication to something or someone (religious), as to particular religious content, conduct, and conforming lifestyle, all with a particular motivation. I hold to what I described in Chapter 3: that my definition of commitment not only includes beliefs, practices, and values but also other aspects of religion such as attitudes, experiences, affiliation, and belonging. As stated in Chapter 4, I argue that my focus on what participants were committed to—the object of their commitment—is a useful way to access the various aspects of commitments because this focus sheds light on the various aspects of religion.

Second, regarding religious identity development, my systematic literature review made clear that it is poorly conceptualized in the included studies. I observed that Visser-Vogel et al.'s (2015) study provided the clearest definition: "a process in which individuals explore and commit to a set of religious beliefs and practices" (p. 91).

28 This changed perception also applies retroactively to Chapter 5, where the term *religious identity* instead of *religious identity commitment* is part of the research question.

Although this definition guided my empirical research, I believe that it does no justice to the complexity of commitment and exploration processes. Thus, I propose that the definition of Bertram-Troost et al. (2006), which also builds on the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory, is more helpful for the empirical study of religious identity development. According to these authors, religious identity development is "the totality of the gradual change in the content and strength of commitments in relation to the way one looks at life and the amount of exploration in the achievement and change of these commitments" (p. 311). The strength of this conceptualization is that it points to the dynamics of commitment and exploration processes, which is indicated by terms such as "gradual change," "content," "strength," "amount of," and "change." These dynamics are also reflected in my findings concerning participants' current commitments (Chapter 4) and past explorations (Chapter 5). I, for example, identified differences in the amount and degree of exploration among participants. Another strength of this conceptualization is that it reflects a perspective on religious identity commitments that leaves room for aspects of religion other than beliefs and practices.

Last, regarding the term *autonomy*, the systematic literature review study made clear that autonomy is an essential theme in the Eriksonian-Marcian literature on the religious identity development of strictly religious youth (see Chapter 3). In Chapter 3, I indicated that autonomy is a Western and postmodern concept. Autonomy may indicate self-centeredness, "self-rule and self-realisation" (Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019, p. 184), reflecting liberal individualism and a postmodern and Western view of religious identity development (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Madge et al., 2014). However, the strictly Reformeds are generally community-oriented and distance themselves from such postmodern influences as individualism. I decided to speak about *agency* instead of autonomy in my empirical study, since agency would better fit the context in which the research population grew up (Kagitcibasi, 2017; Zwemer, 2001). The term *agency* ties in with the term *agents*, which is frequently used in studies into religious identity development as a reference to those who influence and shape youth in this process (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014; Fisherman, 2011; Özdikmenli-Demir & Şahin-Kütük, 2012; Schachter & Marshall, 2010; Schachter & Ventura, 2008).

Moreover, in light of the findings, I argue that the term *agency* leaves more room for manifestations of choices and explorations within strictly religious-raised populations. Taking an autonomy perspective, the sometimes small-scale demonstrations of agency of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults might not be identified as agentic, taking an autonomy perspective. For example, a participant who decided to wear blue instead of black clothes when she went to the Lord's Supper (black clothes were an implicit norm) might be considered agentic because she made a choice different from what was expected. However, this choice might not be considered a manifestation of autonomy. In this regard, a relevant question for further theoretical reflection would be whether youths' perceptions of choice might be more important than the *actual* choice they have, given contextual expectations and their options for exploration. Another question

to reflect upon would be how exploration can be understood and investigated in the case of small-scale demonstrations of agency.

Directions for empirical research methodology

Reflecting on my methodology, I observe that the study of Visser-Vogel (2015) and my systematic literature review study provided a clear and thorough framework for my interviews and analysis. Nevertheless, I assume it is needed to critically discuss my methodology at the end of this research project for future research into religious identity development.

The first point of discussion concerns the population I investigated. My systematic literature review study not only functioned as a conceptual framework for my empirical investigation but also guided the direction of this investigation. Nevertheless, I chose a research population different from those included in my review—that is, strictly religious *adolescents*. Instead, I focused my empirical research on *emerging adults*. I observed that the literature on adolescence and emerging adulthood points to a shift in thinking about these life stages because it seems that people marry and have children later in life than before, and thus the period of adolescence extends. According to Arnett (2015), it is better to speak of a new life stage, emerging adulthood, than of extended adolescence, because this life stage "is very different from adolescence—much freer from parental control, much more a period of independent exploration" (p. 2). He observes that "adolescents are usually very wrapped up in the here-and-now, the social whirl of peers and popularity, fleeting romances and would-be-romances. Emerging adulthood is a time for more serious self-reflection, for thinking about what kind of life you want to live and what your Plan should be for your life" (Arnett, 2015, p. 238). Thus, based on this shift in thinking and the importance of exploration for religious identity development, I decided that it would be better to speak about emerging adults than adolescents. I considered this choice not to be problematic because identity researchers acknowledge that both adolescence and emerging adulthood are the life stage of identity development (Kroger, 2000; McLean & Syed, 2015). Moreover, I observed that, in studies of religious identity development, the terms *adolescents* and *emerging adults* are used interchangeably (cf. Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Visser-Vogel, 2015). Another choice concerning the research population was that I did not only explore the life stories of those who were currently strictly Reformed, but also those who had left the faith or were religious but not strictly Reformed. This was because, as stated in Chapter 1, I supposed that a more variated population would provide richer and deeper insights into processes of religious identity development.

The second point of discussion is that, building on my systematic literature review study, in the interviews, I asked for commitment strength and saliency in religious identity development. During the analysis, I experienced that the data generated by these questions was different from other data. This was because I observed that the

questions, which were formulated quantitatively,[29] generated quantitative answers that did not fit the qualitative nature of the answers to other questions. I therefore maintain that it is better to adjust the questions so they are less quantitative in nature. A last point of discussion is that in Chapter 2, I elaborated on the development of association cards with, on each card, a contextual factor that might have influenced religious identity development. Although I missed such cards in the pilot interviews, in the regular interviews they appeared unnecessary, as the participants were able to explain who or what influenced them. I only sometimes needed to provide examples of potentially influential factors so that participants knew what to think about.

Notwithstanding these discussions concerning my research methodology, I argue that my qualitative research method with a narrative approach helped to generate rich and deep life story accounts of participants' religious identity development. I also argue that my visual methods were a worthy addition to my methodology. After the interviews, I evaluated them, and most participants indicated that participating was "fun," that it helped them to reflect on "what do I consider important and where do I stand exactly," and that it functioned as a tool to "discuss a topic." Some also indicated that without the photos, they would also have been able to narrate about who they were. I experienced that, although participants did not always express this, the photos helped participants who were nervous for the first interview or who were not so verbal to tell their story. This was because they were able to rely on the photos they selected and thought about beforehand. Concerning the timeline, the participants mentioned that it functioned as a "handhold" to "structure" and organize their life story, and as an "overview" to refer to during storytelling. Like with the photos, some participants mentioned that they could have narrated their life story without the help of the timeline. Also, I observed that some participants needed to be reminded to write things down on the timeline, but that these moments of turning back to the timeline focused the interview. Based on these reflections of participants and my own experiences with photos and timelines, I think that these aided both the participants and me as a researcher in explicating and interpreting processes of religious identity development.

The research project and me as a researcher

Recapitulating this research project

Carrying out this research project was a journey that started with becoming familiar with the topic under study, including the existing literature. I conducted my systematic literature review study and further developed a theoretical framework by building on the findings of the review study and the study of Visser-Vogel (2015). The next stop on my journey was my empirical study, which involved that I conducted two life story

29 I asked participants to score the importance of their beliefs and practices to their identity on a 10-point scale.

interviews with 18 participants. These interviews not only provided a great deal of rich data for analysis, but it seems that they also shaped the participants' religious identity development. Rachel, for example, said that she considered the interviews interesting

> because it makes you start thinking about how, eh, how, "what do I think about it myself" and "why is that [the faith] so important?" . . . I do talk about the faith, but not, um, I think it's really the most important thing, but, um, it is also a bit of a culture of keeping your mouth shut . . . so on the other hand, I don't talk about it that much.

In the same line, Julia reflected on the interview:

> I am talking about myself all the time, of course, and that is, sometimes you have to think again about, like, "why do I think this way?" Yes, I don't know, I think it is good to think about that again, like, and look back, like, "why, why do I think the way I think, why did I make those choices?" I do think it is important to keep reflecting on that.

Such reflections of the participants gave me the impression that the interviews thus not only provided me as a researcher with unique insight into their lives, experiences, and perceptions in relation to religion and their strictly Reformed upbringing. Also, the interviews seem to have been a means by which the participants clarified and justified their current commitments and the directions of their developmental path. The quotations support my observation that many participants valued the narrative interviews as important and relevant to their personal lives because they helped them to articulate things. In line with this, Waterman (2015a) maintains that narrative methods help to explore how

> individuals endeavor to make sense of their lives through creating their identity by integrating their life experiences into more or less meaningful narrative stories. Such stories are functional both in promoting self-understanding for the person creating the narrative and in facilitating communication with others about who the person is. (pp. 203–204)

In some cases, the interviews were also confronting, since by articulating things, strengthened by the follow-up questions of the researcher, participants realized that they did not see things very clearly. Robert said, "It's getting pretty confronting now because I just might not know it all [his relationship to the Christian faith]." Moreover, the interviews shaped and influenced me as a researcher in my religious identity commitment and development. In November 2019, I wrote in my logbook:

> I feel that the stories of the emerging adults make me reflect on my own religious identity commitment, on who I am as a Christian, how and to what extent I propagate this, and to what extent I am actively engaged in the faith (in the sense of praying and Bible reading). . . . In particular, the young people who are very actively engaged in the faith (praying a lot and reading the Bible), according to my observation, live close to God. They seem to appeal: that I should also be more active in reading the Bible and praying. This, while at the same time I know/believe that that is not everything. Perhaps, you could say that I admire some participants for their commitment to faith.

Because of the shaping and influencing power of the interviews for both the participants and me as a researcher, I considered this stop on my journey as a special and unique experience.

My data analysis and the writing of articles based on my findings were the next stop on my journey, which I experienced as illuminating since I—so to say—crawled through the data, observed themes and patterns, and translated these into five academic articles. By this, I was able to reflect on what my participants, in confidence and openness, shared with me in the interviews. The last step of my journey involved that I synthesize all the elements of my journey, describe these, and reflect on them in this dissertation.

Reflection on my position as a researcher

In an academic study, the researcher brings his or her own views, opinions, study and work experiences, upbringing, gender, ethnicity, political and religious affiliation, and values that influence his or her perception and interpretation. These may, for example, interfere with the research setting and participants, bias the researcher in his or her participant selection, interviewing, or data analysis, and inevitably impact the meaning-making from the data (Hemming & Madge, 2012; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Although the researcher's interpretation is always subjective, through reflexivity, the researcher becomes aware of what may influence him or her in the research. Besides, through the researcher's reflection, the reader may better understand the researcher's interpretation of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, in this section I reflect on my position as a researcher.

My interest in the topic and population

Being raised in a family with several teachers, from a young age I was interested in education and especially in youth. During my secondary school years, I became increasingly interested in religion and youth religious development. This is why I decided to study theology and educational psychology, started to work as a religion teacher, and after that, as an educational adviser in secondary education. I am especially interested in youth who grew up in highly religious contexts, such as strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults, because their own voice is seldom heard in academia, public

debates, and the media. Also, in my work as an educational advisor, I have heard the stories of teachers and other educators who struggle with guiding children and youngsters in their religious identity development in a positive and supportive way. At the same time, within strictly Reformed contexts and the media, impressions are conveyed that, according to my perception, do not comply with reality, resulting in caricatures. Thus, I have a strong personal motivation to generate more understanding about these emerging adults and their religious identity development and perceptions of this process.

My engagement with the population

I could be perceived as an insider, for I grew up slinking around the edge of strictly Reformed people. I attended a Protestant primary school that was not strictly Reformed, and I went to a church affiliated with the Reformed Association within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Bond binnen de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland). Nevertheless, I attended, for six years, one of the strictly Reformed secondary schools and made friends who, in that period, would have identified themselves as strictly Reformed. During my secondary school years, I observed that I was, in terms of Merriam and Tisdall (2016), both an insider and an outsider in strictly Reformed contexts. This was because I, compared to my fellow students, went to the least strict church, although at school and with friends, I immersed myself in strictly Reformed beliefs and practices. In my student days, the feeling of being an insider and outsider remained, strengthened by my experiences on the student association C.S.F.R. (Civitas Studiosorum in Fundamento Reformato), with many members who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts, and as an interim teacher at two strictly Reformed secondary schools. However, my work as a religion teacher at a non-strictly Reformed secondary school not only influenced my own religious identity development but also strengthened my feelings of being an outsider. This was because, generally, my colleagues were non-Christian and hardly had any knowledge about the Christian faith, but certainly not about strictly Reformeds. Participating in such a non-Christian colleague community and student community made me feel that strictly Reformed contexts were far away.

After completing a bachelor's degree in theology and a master's in educational psychology, I got a job as an educational adviser of an organization that is strongly affiliated with the strictly Reformed tradition and the Reformed confession. In this role, I worked for, among others, strictly Reformed secondary schools, which makes me feel like an insider. I would argue that this insider/outsider position benefitted my empirical research, for according to Patton (2002), "understanding comes from trying to put oneself in the other person's shoes, from trying to discern how others think, act, and feel" (p. 49). I propose that the insider position enabled me to immerse myself in the participants' (former) strictly Reformed contexts. Also, I suppose that for some participants, especially those who identified themselves as strictly Reformed, it was a binding force that helped them to feel freer to express themselves. At the same time,

the outsider position enabled me to distance myself from the context to take a more neutral stance in interviewing, data analysis, and interpretation. Moreover, I suppose it enabled me to bond with those participants who were not strictly Reformed anymore and who were critical of their religious socialization. In the following subsection, I explain how I, in the interviews, dealt with the insider/outsider position.

Me as an interviewer

Collins-Mayo and Rankin (2010) state that in qualitative research, it is important that the researcher and participant trust each other, and therefore it is needed for the researcher to establish a relationship with the participant or, in other words, to build rapport. By this, participants "are willing to disclose what are deeply felt core experiences" (Josselson & Flum, 2015, p. 144). Considering that the topics of the interviews were perceived as personal and sensitive, I argue that building rapport was of particular importance in my research project. Therefore, at the beginning of each interview, I invested in getting to know the participant and gaining the participant's confidence. I tried to be genuinely interested in the participants by, for example, asking in the second interview about things the participants had said in the first interview, such as about the wedding of a sibling or whether someone had passed his or her exam. In the communication after the interviews, I also took this personal approach. By this, I hoped the participants felt that I was concerned with their lives and situations, that they were not just one of 18 participants, and that their individual stories mattered to me.

Reflecting on the interviews, I believe that my endeavors in building up rapport generally succeeded because most participants were very open, sharing personal and sensitive information. For example, one participant told me that he watched pornography, and other participants told me about their psychological issues and grave problems in their home situations. In addition, some participants said, both on and off the record, that they felt as though they were speaking with a psychologist, which they experienced as valuable and illuminating. Julia, for example, said at the end of one of the interviews:

> sometimes it gets close, yes, because you don't just tell that to everyone. So that is quite difficult, I think, to just tell that. Anyway, it is also good to think about that, 'of where it actually comes from and how I became I am who I am'?

This ties in with what Perrin (2020) states about her experiences with interviewing youth about religion: "some commented that taking part had felt like a form of therapy or allowed them to see patterns they had never previously identified in their faith journey" (p. xv). Also, this ties in with Bruce's (2002) experiences with participants who considered life story interviews helpful in retaining a commitment, self-reflection, and deepening their understanding.

Another way in which I tried to develop trust was by emphasizing at the start of the interviews that every answer was okay—that there were no right or wrong answers. Interestingly, this appeared to be important, as several participants apologized for their answers or negatively commented on their answers. Tobias, for example, said: "Um, yes, people do a lot of bad things, I think so. At that point, I agree with the Calvinists, but yes, that debt element is not okay. Sorry, yes, yes, yes." I emphasized that participants were free to speak out, although I was aware that my strictly religious-raised population might give socially desirable answers because they wanted to maintain a positive image of themselves and the strictly Reformed context. Another reason for socially desirable answers might be that participants wanted to conform to a certain ideal religious identity commitment image that was transmitted to them, including beliefs in practices. Therefore, in the interview, I strove for a positive atmosphere to encourage the participants to share their own experiences, reflections, and understandings. If I suspected that the participants were responding in a socially desirable way, I tried to reveal the story behind their story with the following techniques: (a) I asked supplementary questions or (b) I asked them to provide examples that illustrated their statements.

Reflecting on the interviews I conducted, I noticed that my relationships with participants varied and that, with some participants, I bonded more than with others, although professional distance was prioritized (Collins-Mayo & Rankin, 2010). I experienced that spending so much time with each participant and listening to very personal experiences, emotions, and perceptions inevitably creates a bond. This was especially the case regarding two participants who were gay: they shared all the difficulties they went through, which left a lasting impression and made me feel more personally involved with them compared to other participants. Another example is a participant who was, like the researcher, pregnant at the time of the interview, which also strengthened the interviewer-interviewee relationship.

Considering the insider/outsider position, in the development of the interview guidelines, I was attentive to the language and wordings of questions that might include biases, and the pilot interviews gave more insights into this issue. I tried to connect to the various participants by paying attention to my appearance and my wordings (Collins-Mayo & Rankin, 2010). For example, I wore the same clothes in all first interviews, for I wanted to give all participants the same outward impression of myself. I even paid attention, concerning participants who identified themselves before the interview as strictly Reformed, to my makeup, type of earrings, and length of my skirt or dress. This is because I supposed these things could portray me too much as an outsider, thereby hindering the relationship with my participants. I sometimes tried to go along with the participants' language: for example, when a participant spoke about "the Lord," I also used this word, instead of "God." Likewise, when a participant told me about a festival he visited and asked whether I knew the festival, I deliberately confirmed that I knew it, thereby making myself an insider to build a relationship with the participant. Also, in the interviews, I sometimes deliberately chose to take the role of

an outsider in two ways: first, by "playing devil's advocate," which means that I described a hypothetical situation or perspective, or a contrary opinion, to which the participant then needed to respond and reflect. Second, I sometimes deliberately pretended to be ignorant, especially when the participants used religious language. This invited the participants to explicate their sayings, and I gained more insights into their perceptions.

To take a more neutral stance in the interviews, I tried to have an empathetic and a non-judgmental attitude toward the participants. This is because, according to Collins-Mayo and Rankin (2010), "our commitment to academic research and our contribution to sociological understandings rest on our ability to recognize but then bracket out our personal sympathies, including our own religious commitments" (p. 198). Therefore, I did not reveal my own opinions during the interviews, although several participants were interested in whether I would identify myself as strictly Reformed and were interested in my views on the topics discussed. I supposed it was not fair to avoid any conversation about my own position and perceptions, for participants also exposed themselves in the interviews, thereby making themselves vulnerable. When participants explicitly asked for my views, I responded that I would explain a bit about my own engagement with strict Reformedness after the interview because I did not want to focus on myself and influence the interviewee during the interview. However, it appeared that some participants struggled with this lack of openness during the interview. As Adrian explains:

> Yes, it is rather difficult, I must honestly say, that you, you, of course, give nothing, no signals, and no nothing, you give nothing really, no response, because I find it difficult to deal with that. Because when I actually have conversations with people, I mean, you naturally interpret a lot from, like, non-verbal communication and relationships that make you, like, probably act differently, um, and that, that is very frustrating.

Interestingly, various participants told me that I gave the impression that I had no judgment about what they said and that I seemed like a neutral person. I think this was because, even though I acknowledge that I am not fully neutral, I would say that I have an open attitude. Moreover, I consider it important to respect each participant, independent of his or her beliefs and practices.

Sometimes it was difficult to remain neutral, as when, for example, a participant who is gay directly asked for my opinion about the Nashvilleverklaring (2019)[30]; this participant experienced the statement as a personal attack. In this specific situation, I felt that it would hinder the interview if I did not express myself about the statement, and therefore I decided to give my opinion, although carefully formulated. By voicing

30 A Dutch version of The Nashville Statement (The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 2017) on biblical sexuality. Several strictly Reformed ministers and the leader of the strictly Reformed political party in the Netherlands signed this statement.

my opinion, a common ground was created, and I felt that the relationship with the participant was strengthened. Likewise, when participants explained that they had been through traumatic and sad events that sometimes related to their strictly Reformed upbringing, it was impossible or even unempathetic to not respond to their story. I then responded with understanding and support to build and keep a good relationship with the participant. Thus, based on the specific interview situation, I decided on what I wanted to share about myself.

Future research

This research project is not an end point, as the findings may be a starting point for further research. In chapters 3 to 7, I pointed at directions for future research related to the specific findings elaborated upon in those chapters. In addition to these directions, in the following subsections, I provide suggestions for future research methods and topics.

First, in my research project, I interviewed participants in the phase of emerging adulthood because of the significance of this life phase for religious identity development. I, however, propose that it is needed for future researchers to conduct longitudinal research. An advantage of a longitudinal research study would be that the ongoing process of religious identity development within a (strictly) religious-raised emerging adult population can be identified. In my interviews, I asked participants about their perception of their future religious identity commitment. These answers, which were not analyzed within this research project, indicate that various participants expect that their commitment will (slightly) change. This ties in with my perception of religious identity development as an ongoing process in which a commitment can be broadened, confirmed, renewed, or changed after a period of exploration. Another advantage of longitudinal research would be that it provides insights into how precisely feelings of being not good enough, and the underlying black-or-white worldview, emerge and develop over time, and what the enduring consequences of these might be. Since a qualitative longitudinal study might be time-consuming, another option would be to interview emerging adults and to do a follow-up study within the same population after five or ten years (cf. Carlsson et al., 2015; Marcia, 1976). With Naudé and Capitano (2020), I endorse that longitudinal research could start "in the early developmental years and continues into adulthood" (p. 17). My interviews indicated that—among adolescence and emerging adulthood—childhood was a formative period in religious identity development because it lays the foundation for this ongoing process. Thus, further research might explore processes of religious identity development in the early developmental years.

Second, in my research project, I conducted life story interviews. My experiences with such interviews indicate that participation in such interviews had impact on my participant, but also on me as the researcher who conducted the interviews (see this

chapter). In this regard, Atkinson (2012) argued that life story telling "*can potentially be a transformative experience*, from the power of the exchange itself, from the depth of the bond that is created, and from the meaning that is shared" (p. 124, italics in original). Likewise, Bruce (2008) speaks about "consciousness-raising" (p. 330), which implies that, through storytelling, both participant and researcher "gain new awareness" (p. 330). This new awareness suggests "a potential for learning, growth, and change within the narrative research process" (Bruce, 2008, p. 331). Therefore, I recommend that future researchers investigate how participants and researchers are shaped by life story interviews and how these interviews contribute to their religious identity development.

Third, I included visual tools into my research design to access participants' current commitments, past explorations, and the contextual influences in their religious identity development. The self-chosen photos and self-drawn timelines of participants proved to be valuable tools for elicitation, self-expression, and the organization of one's life story. I thus suggest that future researchers into religious identity development (of strictly religious-raised populations) also include such tools in their research design.

Fourth, the findings of my research project convey the impression that the participants' personal aspects and backgrounds, such as interests, character traits, education level, and the demographic area in which the individual grew up, influence processes of commitment-making and exploration. These aspects and backgrounds may also influence the perceptions of contextual influences and experiences of being not good enough. Although I took some of these into account when selecting my sample, they were not specific objects of investigation or analysis. Therefore, I recommend that future researchers investigate how personality and demographics shape the directions the religious identity developmental path can take.

Final words

I perceive my research project as a stage for the stories and voices of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts. I believe that these stories and voices are relevant and important to listen to. I hope that they contribute to reflections on current practices of religious formation and socialization, but also on perceptions of this specific population. Moreover, I hope that such reflections ultimately lead to increasing support and encouragement of children and young people in finding their own way in their religious identity development. I thereby am convinced that not just educators' efforts "guarantee young people's Christian commitment" (Clements, 2020, p. 202). This is because supporting and encouraging religious identity development "is a matter of participating in God's work in young people's lives" (Clements, 2020, p. 202) and acknowledging the role of the Holy Spirit in this process (de Muynck & Visser-Vogel, 2020).

I end this dissertation with a fragment from my interview with Norah. I spoke with her about her perceptions of raising children within the Christian faith, and in the

interview she related her perceptions of the way she was socialized. The following fragment captures not only Norah's voice, but generally all the voices of my participants when it comes to what they need in religious identity development and find important in this process:

> I would consider it very important that they [my future children] have the living faith. . . . We were used to singing when we went to bed as kids. . . . Really that guidance . . . in personal faith. I would consider that very important. . . . In my opinion, everyone in my family has personal faith. It may be a bit less and a bit more space for personal faith development. A bit less static. I like reading the Bible and the children's Bible, but I guess . . . you could support your child in a such way that it feels it [the religious identity commitment] is his or her own choice. . . . Otherwise, it might just be a habitual faith. I would consider it very important that they [my future children] form their own opinions concerning faith. I would do the same [as my parents] . . . those fixed habits, like reading the Bible. I think that's just really good to do. Stable, say. What would I do differently? I hope there is extra space for talking together about the faith.[31]

31 To increase the readability of the three quotations on this page, I slightly adjusted the verbatim transcribed text.

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Nederlandse samenvatting [Dutch summary]

Nederlandse samenvatting [Dutch summary]

Aanleiding en onderzoeksvragen

De huidige generatie jongvolwassenen[32] is minder religieus dan hun ouders en grootouders, zo stelt Arnett (2015, p. 223). Dit, zo betoogt hij, duidt erop dat de religieuze opvoeding door de ouders niet het beoogde effect heeft op de volgende generatie. Deze uitspraak over jongvolwassenen in de Verenigde Staten is representatief voor een patroon in de academische literatuur over de religiositeit van deze leeftijdsgroep: hun religiositeit neemt af of verandert, ook als jongvolwassenen religieus gesocialiseerd zijn. Over het algemeen wordt deze afname of verandering in religiositeit toegeschreven aan de levensfase van jongvolwassenheid. Volgens Smith en Snell (2009) staan jongvolwassenen voor de opgave om op hun eigen benen te gaan staan en onafhankelijk te worden. Dit betekent dat ze ook in bepaalde mate afstand nemen van hoe ze zijn opgevoed en van de religieuze gemeenschap waarin ze zijn opgegroeid (p. 150).

Kenmerkend voor de toenemende onafhankelijkheid is dat jongvolwassenen streven naar agency of eigenaarschap (Arnett, 2015). Dit houdt in dat zij hun eigen, bewuste keuzes willen maken met betrekking tot hun waarden, overtuigingen en praktijken. Vragen die bij jongvolwassenen kunnen leven, zijn: aan welke waarden, overtuigingen en praktijken die ik heb meegekregen in mijn opvoeding, wil ik mijzelf committeren? En hoe kan ik, voortbouwend op mijn religieuze opvoeding, mijn eigen set aan waarden, overtuigingen en praktijken vormgeven? Ik veronderstel dat deze vragen worden versterkt doordat jongeren bij het ouder worden in toenemende mate in aanraking komen met andere ideeën en percepties van buiten de eigen religieuze gemeenschap. Bovendien sluit ik me aan bij Perrin (2020), die stelt dat voor jongvolwassenen het ontwikkelen van een stabiele, volwassen identiteit (al dan niet religieus) een stuk complexer is dan voor vorige generaties, omdat jongeren meer dan ooit externe druk ervaren en geconfronteerd worden met allerlei mogelijkheden en veranderingen (p. 152).

In het licht van deze veranderingen en uitdagingen in de religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling van jongvolwassenen is het relevant om onderzoek te doen naar processen van religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling. Volgens Negru et al. (2014), die onderzoek hebben gedaan naar de religieuze socialisatie van Roemeense jongeren, is er nog weinig bekend over de religieuze ontwikkeling van jongvolwassenen in culturele contexten buiten Noord-Amerika (p. 381). Tevens is er weinig bekend over

32 In mijn onderzoek heb ik een populatie van jongvolwassenen in de leeftijd van 22 tot 25 jaar oud onderzocht. In de interviews vertelden jongeren over hun religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling in zowel de levensfase van de kindertijd en adolescentie (het verleden) als de jongvolwassenheid (het heden). In deze samenvatting gebruik ik de term *jongvolwassenen* als ik in algemene zin spreek over de onderzoekspopulatie en als ik inga op hun huidige religieuze identiteitscommitment. Daarnaast gebruik ik de term *jongeren* in mijn reflecties op processen van religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling, zowel binnen de onderzoekspopulatie als in andere studies naar dit onderwerp.

de religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling bij jongeren die streng religieus zijn opgevoed (zie hoofdstuk 3). Voor deze jongeren vormt het aangaan van bindingen of commitments een uitdaging, zeker in postmoderne contexten. Ze hebben immers zowel te maken met verwachtingen van hun streng religieuze opvoeders, als met processen van secularisatie en pluralisme in de samenleving.

Dit onderzoek beoogt meer inzicht te geven in de religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling van reformatorisch opgevoede jongvolwassenen. Dit inzicht is nodig omdat zij, in vergelijking tot leeftijdsgenoten, tot een minderheidsgroep behoren waar weinig academisch onderzoek naar is gedaan. Desondanks leven er in het publieke domein allerlei beelden over deze jongvolwassenen en wordt er veel over hen gepraat, terwijl hun eigen stem zelden wordt gehoord.

Om processen van religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling te begrijpen, behelst dit onderzoeksproject een systematische reviewstudie van de literatuur naar streng religieuze jongeren en identiteitsontwikkeling (hoofdstuk 3). Ook omvat het onderzoeksproject een empirische studie naar specifieke aspecten van religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling: religieuze identiteitsbindingen of commitments (hoofdstuk 4), exploratieprocessen (hoofdstuk 5) en de rol van contextuele factoren in religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling (hoofdstuk 6). Deze aspecten zijn ingegeven door de thema's die naar voren komen in de bespreking van de bestaande literatuur over religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling (zie hoofdstuk 3). Tot slot omvat het onderzoek een verkenning van een dominant patroon in de empirische data, namelijk dat veel participanten het gevoel hebben (gehad) dat zij niet goed genoeg zijn (zie hoofdstuk 7).

De centrale onderzoeksvraag in het onderzoekproject luidt: Hoe kan de religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling van jongvolwassenen die in een reformatorisch opvoedingsmilieu in Nederland zijn opgegroeid, worden beschreven en geïnterpreteerd?

In het beantwoorden van deze hoofdvraag zijn de volgende deelvragen leidend:

- Hoe conceptualiseren en onderzoeken bestaande studies naar streng religieuze adolescenten hun religieuze identiteit en religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling, en waarop dienen toekomstige onderzoekers zich te richten om beter zicht te krijgen op deze populatie?
- Welke religieuze identiteitscommitments hebben jongvolwassenen die in een reformatorisch opvoedingsmilieu in Nederland zijn opgegroeid?
- Hoe hebben Nederlandse jongvolwassenen die reformatorisch zijn opgevoed, hun religieuze identiteit geëxploreerd, en hoe hebben zij deze exploratie ervaren?
- Welke contextuele factoren zijn, volgens jongvolwassenen die reformatorisch zijn opgevoed in Nederland, van invloed geweest op hun religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling, en hoe waarderen en karakteriseren zij deze invloed?
- Hoe kunnen gevoelens van niet goed genoeg zijn die naar voren kwamen in de levensverhalen van Nederlandse reformatorisch opgevoede jongvolwassenen, begrepen en verklaard worden?

In de beantwoording van de onderzoeksvragen staat het perspectief van de jongvolwassenen centraal. De reden hiervoor is dat ik de participanten zelf als belangrijkste bron beschouw voor het verkrijgen van meer inzicht in hun religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling. In het onderzoeksproject krijgen jongvolwassenen dan ook een stem door het delen van hun levensverhaal in de vorm van interviews.

Theoretische achtergrond en methode

Religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling is het centrale begrip in dit onderzoeksproject. Dit begrip definieer ik vanuit de theorie van identiteitsontwikkeling van Erikson (1968). Deze theorie is geoperationaliseerd door Marcia (1966, 1980) en verder ontwikkeld door verschillende onderzoekers (Crocetti et al., 2008; Luyckx et al., 2006). In het onderzoek wordt de identiteitsontwikkelingstheorie toegepast op religie als een van de verschillende identiteitsdomeinen naast bijvoorbeeld familie, politiek en etniciteit. Volgens de theorie is religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling een actief en doorgaand proces dat haar hoogtepunt heeft in adolescentie en jongvolwassenheid (McLean & Syed, 2015). Twee belangrijke aspecten van dit proces zijn het aangaan van bindingen en het exploreren. Een ander aspect is dat religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling plaatsvindt in interactie met de sociaal-culturele context die dit proces vormgeeft, stimuleert en mogelijk ook verhindert (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009; Fisherman, 2004, 2011; Fivush, 2013; James et al., 2014; Schachter & Ventura, 2008; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012, 2015).

Het onderzoek bestaat uit zowel een systematische review van de literatuur naar de religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling van streng religieuze jongeren als een empirische studie naar commitment, explorations en de invloed van contextuele factoren. Voor de systematische reviewstudie heb ik op basis van vooraf bepaalde zoektermen systematisch in vier databases gezocht naar eerder onderzoek. Vervolgens heb ik op basis van specifieke criteria studies geïncludeerd of geëxcludeerd voor verdere analyse. Deze analyse was er enerzijds op gericht om zicht te krijgen op het conceptualiseren van religieuze identiteit en religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling. Anderzijds beoogde de analyse terugkerende thema's te identificeren die kunnen bijdragen aan verder onderzoek naar en kennis van religieuze ontwikkeling.

Voor de empirische studie naar religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling heb ik een kwalitatief onderzoek gedaan, bestaande uit narratieve, semigestructureerde interviews met achttien jongvolwassenen in de leeftijd van 22–25 jaar. In deze interviews vertelden zij wie ze nu zijn en deelden ze hun levensverhaal van hun geboorte tot nu. Al deze jongvolwassenen zijn in een reformatorisch opvoedingsmilieu opgegroeid, maar ze verschillen in religieuze identificatie. Bij de selectie van participanten kwamen namelijk drie profielen van religieuze identificatie naar voren: jongvolwassen (1) die zich christelijk en reformatorisch noemden; (2) die zich christelijk, maar niet-reformatorisch noemden; en (3) die zich niet niet-christelijk of niet-religieus noemden. Ik heb bewust gekozen voor een gelijke verdeling van deze profielen onder de respondenten, evenals voor zoveel mogelijk variatie in geslacht, leeftijd, en opleidingsniveau. Elke jongvolwassene

heb ik tweemaal geïnterviewd. In het eerste interview vertelden participanten aan de hand van zelfgekozen foto's wie zij nu zijn en in het tweede interview vertelden participanten aan de hand van een zelfgetekende tijdlijn over het proces van hun religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling.

Bevindingen

De bevindingen van de review van de literatuur worden weergegeven in hoofdstuk 3 en de empirische bevindingen in hoofdstuk 4 t/m 7. Elk van de hoofdstukken 3 t/m 7 is eerder gepubliceerd in of ingediend bij internationale, wetenschappelijke tijdschriften voor ontwikkelingspsychologie, *youth ministry* en godsdienstpedagogiek.

Hoofdstuk 3 beschrijft, ordent en bediscussieert op basis van de reviewstudie, de literatuur over jongeren die streng religieus zijn opgevoed. Deze studie laat zien dat er weinig empirisch en theoretisch onderzoek bestaat naar deze jongeren en hun religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling. Ook laat de studie zien dat de geïncludeerde studies voornamelijk geworteld zijn in de traditie van de Erikson-Marciaanse identiteitstheorie, en dat ze verschillend zijn in methodologie en onvolledig in hun conceptualiseringen van religieuze identiteit en identiteitsontwikkeling. Verder geeft de studie inzicht in drie belangrijke thema's in onderzoek naar religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling bij streng religieus opgevoede jongeren: contextuele invloed; exploratie en commitment; en autonomie en keuze. Deze thema's hebben richting gegeven aan het empirische onderzoek.

Hoofdstuk 4 presenteert de bevindingen van het onderzoek naar welke huidige religieuze identiteitscommitments reformatorisch opgevoede jongvolwassenen hebben. Onder commitment versta ik de toewijding aan bepaalde religieuze inhoud, gedrag en een bijbehorende levensstijl. Hieronder vallen dus waarden, overtuigen en praktijken, maar ook andere aspecten van religie, zoals houdingen, ervaringen en betrokkenheid. In de analyse kwamen vier typen religieuze identiteitscommitments van participanten naar voren die in hoofdstuk 4 worden geïllustreerd. Deze commitments laten zien waaraan participanten verbonden zijn: aan vertrouwen op God, aan zichzelf, aan rationeel geloof en aan het nog niet weten. Daarnaast weerspiegelt elk commitment bepaalde overtuigingen, praktijken, waarden, ervaringen en houdingen of juist de afwezigheid daarvan, zoals bij het commitment aan zichzelf en aan het nog niet weten. De bevindingen laten zien dat, ondanks het feit dat de jongvolwassenen grotendeels op dezelfde manier reformatorisch gesocialiseerd zijn, ze diverse en ook diffuse commitments hebben. In alle commitments speelt echter de opvoeding een rol.

De participanten met een commitment aan het vertrouwen op God hebben een persoonlijke relatie met God of noemen zich bekeerd. Voor sommige van hen geldt dat hun commitment veel overeenkomsten vertoont met de waarden, overtuigingen en praktijken van hun opvoeding; terwijl andere deze aangepast hebben en zo hun eigen binding hebben geconstrueerd. Het tweede commitment betreft participanten die gecommitteerd zijn aan zichzelf. Deze jongvolwassenen hebben nadrukkelijk afstand genomen van wat hun in de opvoeding is meegeven

en zij vinden het dan ook belangrijk om nu zelf hun eigen leven te bepalen. Zij laten zich hierbij niet leiden door bepaalde religieuze overtuigingen en praktijken, maar zijn hun eigen norm. De participanten met het derde commitment, de binding aan rationeel geloof in God, blijken onderscheid te maken tussen geloven met het verstand—wat op hen van toepassing is—en geloven met het hart—waar ze op hopen of wat ze wensen. Degenen onder hen die zich reformatorisch noemen, spreken in meer afstandelijke bewoordingen over God en zij hangen sterk aan de overtuiging van de menselijke zondigheid. Het commitment van deze specifieke participanten lijkt dan ook in overeenstemming te zijn met hun reformatorische opvoeding. Het laatste commitment, aan het niet weten, is een additionele binding. Dit houdt in dat, behoudens één participant, deze binding voornamelijk voorkomt bij participanten die ook gecommitteerd zijn aan zichzelf. Kenmerkend voor de participanten met deze binding is dat ze afstand hebben genomen van het christelijke geloof, met als gevolg dat ze op dit moment niet weten waar ze voor staan of waar ze aan verbonden zijn.

In hoofdstuk 5 ga ik in op processen van exploratie, dat naast commitment het centrale proces in religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling is. Exploratie houdt in dat een individu vragen stelt, twijfels heeft, exploreert in gedrag en andere ideeën en perspectieven verkent voordat hij of zij zich committeert, het bestaande commitment behoudt of deze uitbreidt (Crocetti, 2017; Layton et al., 2012). In het hoofdstuk worden drie vormen van exploratie gepresenteerd die participanten in hun ontwikkeling hebben laten zien, gerelateerd aan hun huidige commitments.

Allereerst hebben participanten geëxploreerd door het stellen van vragen. Vragen over de reformatorische interpretatie van het geloof, vragen over de eigen religieuze identiteit en vragen over het christelijk geloof. Bepaalde vragen bleken gericht op meer begrip, andere op kritische reflectie of op de eigen positionering ten aanzien van het geloof en de reformatorische interpretatie daarvan.

Ten tweede exploreerden participanten door het verkennen van alternatieven: andere religies en filosofieën, maar ook andere interpretaties van het christelijk geloof. De bevindingen laten zien dat zij voornamelijk de alternatieve interpretaties van het christelijk geloof hebben verkend door zich te verdiepen in andere, niet-reformatorische manieren van geloven, andere denominaties en het bijwonen van bijeenkomsten. Ten derde hebben participanten geëxploreerd in gedrag door dingen te doen die niet toegestaan of gewenst zijn binnen de reformatorische traditie. Verschillende participanten hebben echter ook niet 'gerebelleerd'.

Ook valt op dat de reformatorische opvoedingscontext van invloed is geweest op de exploratieprocessen. Dit wordt zichtbaar in het type vragen dat jongvolwassenen hebben gesteld, de reikwijdte van hun exploratie en hun ervaringen met exploratie. Zo weerspiegelen de type vragen die participanten stelden, bepaalde verwachtingen ten aanzien van praktijken, ideaalbeelden over bekering en bekeerde gelovigen, en wereldbeelden over wat waar en goed is. Daarnaast deelden participanten in de interviews negatieve exploratie-ervaringen: dat verschillende reformatorische

christenen geen of onbevredigende antwoorden gaven op vragen of dat hun vragen niet begrepen werden.

Tot slot bediscussieer ik verschillende patronen van exploratie die voorkwamen bij participanten met bepaalde commitments. Zo exploreerden de participanten die gecommitteerd zijn aan rationeel geloof het minst en als ze exploreerden, was dit oppervlakkig. De vragen die ze stelden, waren bijvoorbeeld voornamelijk gericht op het verkrijgen van meer begrip. Verder is hun rebellie nauwelijks te interpreteren als exploratie omdat het zo beperkt bleef. Ook lijken ze geen open houding te hebben gehad ten opzichte van de alternatieven die ze hebben verkend. Dit betekent dat hun exploratie los lijkt te staan van hun huidige commitment aan rationeel geloof. Voor de participanten gecommitteerd aan vertrouwen op God geldt dat zij actiever hebben geëxploreerd en voornamelijk vragen hebben gesteld over hoe ze tot geloof kunnen komen en zekerheid van het geloof kunnen krijgen. Als zodanig heeft hun exploratie invloed gehad op hun huidige commitment: de participanten hebben immers een persoonlijke relatie met God. Ook hun exploratie van alternatieven lijkt invloed te hebben gehad. Deze jongvolwassenen hadden namelijk een meer open houding ten aanzien van andere christelijke interpretaties van het geloof en sommige van hen hebben zich dan ook aangesloten bij een kerk die minder reformatorisch van aard is dan de kerk van hun jeugd. De participanten die op dit moment gecommitteerd zijn aan zichzelf, hebben het meest van alle jongvolwassenen geëxploreerd. Bij hen lijkt de exploratie dan ook het meeste invloed te hebben gehad, voornamelijk op het proces waarin ze afstand namen van het geloof. Opvallend is dat jongeren met een commitment aan zichzelf voornamelijk openheid hebben getoond ten aanzien van alternatieven buiten het geloof en niet binnen het geloof. Een commitment waarbij een jongere zich wel christelijk noemt, maar bepaalde reformatorische overtuigingen loslaat - bijvoorbeeld de Bijbel het onfeilbare Woord van God is - komt dan ook niet voor bij de geïnterviewde jongeren.

Hoofdstuk 6 gaat specifiek in op de invloed van de omgeving, te weten contextuele factoren en hun invloed op het proces van religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling. Verschillende studies laten namelijk zien dat processen van religieuze ontwikkeling bepaald worden door de sociale omgeving (zie Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014; de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Fisherman, 2011; Hemming & Madge, 2012; Sherkat, 2003; Visser-Vogel et al., 2015). Jongeren zijn in deze processen *agents* die actief participeren in hun eigen religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling en ze worden gevormd door wat de omgeving hun aanreikt (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Hemming & Mage, 2012; Madge et al., 2014; Schachter &Ventura, 2008). In het hoofdstuk wordt de omgeving aangeduid met het begrip *contextuele factoren*: personen, maar ook zaken als *life events*, organisaties, boeken en evenementen. Allereerst laten de bevindingen zien dat intimi, leeftijdsgenoten, levensgebeurtenissen, christelijke jongerengroepen- en activiteiten het vaakst genoemd worden als invloedrijke contextuele factoren. Opvallend is dat de jongeren over het algemeen de invloed van personen als positief beschouwen. Voor christelijke personen in het algemeen, en specifiek voor ouders,

geldt echter dat de jongeren hun invloed zowel positief als negatief ervaren. Ten tweede laten de bevindingen zien dat de waardering van contextuele factoren afhangt van hoe personen *waren* en wat zij *deden*, met inbegrip van de personen betrokken bij *life events* of jeugdbijeenkomsten.

Als het gaat om de vraag hoe personen *waren* in het proces van religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling, dan blijkt dat participanten terugkijkend op dit proces het als positief hebben ervaren als een persoon hen accepteerde zoals ze waren, onafhankelijk van wat participanten deden of dachten. Dit maakte dat participanten de ruimte ervoeren om gevoelens, twijfels en persoonlijke zaken te delen met de ander. Tevens waardeerden participanten het positief als personen inspirerend en voorbeeldig waren: als zij rolmodel waren in het geloof, en het geloof uitdroegen en daar ook vanuit eigen ervaring over spraken. Eveneens waardeerden participanten het positief als zij iets gemeenschappelijks met een persoon hadden, bijvoorbeeld hun overtuigingen, proces van ontwikkeling, opvoeding of leeftijd. Wat zij echter als een negatieve invloed aanduidden is dat (reformatorische) christenen zich hypocriet gedroegen en dus niet het verwachte rolmodel waren voor de participanten.

Als het gaat om wat personen *deden* in het proces van religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling, wordt duidelijk dat participanten het als positief hebben ervaren als deze met hen in gesprek gingen: dit gesprek initieerde, faciliteerde, maar ook vragen stelden aan de participanten zelf. Dit is opvallend te noemen, omdat verschillende participanten in de interviews aangaven dat er in hun opvoeding weinig (persoonlijk) gesproken werd over het geloof. Ook waardeerden participanten een persoon als een positieve invloed als deze hun andere perspectieven aanreikte. Het gaat dan om zowel christelijke perspectieven anders dan het reformatorische, als nieuwe, niet-christelijke perspectieven op zaken buiten het geloof. Wat participanten als negatief ervaren hebben, is dat personen hen belemmerden in hun doen en laten door bepaalde regels op te leggen, dingen te verbieden, hen in een bepaalde richting te duwen of hun weinig ruimte te bieden voor eigen keuzes en om onafhankelijk te denken. Ook gaven zij aan dat het hen negatief beïnvloedde als personen focusten op wat goed en fout is. Wat resoneert in deze bevindingen, is dat jongeren behoefte hebben aan een *agency*-bevorderende omgeving in hun religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling. Dit betekent dat ze geaccepteerd worden, als volwaardige gesprekspartners worden beschouwd en andere perspectieven krijgen aangereikt.

In hoofdstuk 7 ga ik in op een dominant thema dat naar voren is gekomen in de verhalen van de participanten over hun religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling. Bijna alle participanten voelen of voelden zich namelijk 'niet goed genoeg'. Deze gevoelens hadden jongeren tegenover God en gelovigen binnen het eigen reformatorische opvoedingsmilieu, zoals ouders, leraren en gemeenteleden. De bevindingen laten zien dat gevoelens van niet goed genoeg zijn in de data gerelateerd zijn aan specifieke aspecten van de reformatorische opvoeding, namelijk bepaalde ideaalbeelden en overtuigingen die worden meegeven in de opvoeding. Het gaat hierbij om ideaalbeelden over goede, echte of bekeerde christenen en een daaruitvolgende

focus op wat goed en fout is. Ook gaat het om overtuigingen als dat de mens zondig is en niet in staat is om iets goed te doen, dat bekering iets heel moeilijks en bijna onbereikbaars is, en dat God een strenge God is die mensen oordeelt en bepaalt of mensen naar de hemel of de hel gaan. Al deze verschillende aspecten van de opvoeding weerspiegelen een zwart-wit wereldbeeld: dingen zijn goed of fout en mensen gaan naar de hemel of naar de hel. Ook blijkt dat deze aspecten gevoelens van schuld en angst teweegbrengen onder jongvolwassenen.

Voor de participanten met een commitment aan zichzelf en voor degenen met een commitment aan het nog niet weten zijn de gevoelens van tekortschieten behoorlijk saillant. Gezien het feit dat deze participanten (in een zekere mate) afstand genomen hebben van het geloof en de kerk, is te verwachten dat ze elementen van de reformatorische opvoeding die bijdragen aan dit soort gevoelens, achter zich gelaten hebben. Het lijkt er echter op dat deze participanten tegen hun wil in altijd een stemmetje in hun achterhoofd hebben dat angst of gevoelens van schuld veroorzaakt.

Op basis van de bevindingen concludeer ik hoofdstuk 7 dat gevoelens van niet goed genoeg zijn substantiële impact kunnen hebben op de religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling van jongvolwassenen. Allereerst kunnen de ideaalbeelden en de focus op wat goed en fout is een vacuüm genereren: jongvolwassenen moeten voldoen aan de ideaalbeelden, maar deze zijn zo perfect dat dat onmogelijk is. Bovendien beschouwen jongeren zich, vanwege het geloof in de zondigheid van de mens, überhaupt niet in staat om aan de ideaalbeelden te voldoen. Ik veronderstel dat, in tegenstelling tot jongeren die bijvoorbeeld evangelisch of rooms-katholiek gesocialiseerd zijn, reformatorisch opgevoede jongeren niet echt een uitweg uit het vacuüm van niet goed genoeg zijn lijken te hebben. Zo is er binnen de rooms-katholieke traditie aandacht voor rituelen en boetedoening (Walinga et al., 2005) en wordt er binnen de evangelische kerken nadruk gelegd op de reddende, bevrijdende en verzoenende kracht van Jezus' dood (Strhan, 2019). Ten tweede kunnen jongeren door gevoelens van niet goed genoeg zijn weerhouden worden om te exploreren en *agency* te tonen, hoewel juist dat belangrijk wordt geacht in gezonde processen van religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling (Barrow et al., 2020; Hemming & Madge, 2012). Volgens de studie van Barrow et al. (2020) bieden ouders ruimte voor *agency* als zij de religieuze opvattingen en keuzes van hun kinderen respecteren en accepteren. Dit sluit aan bij mijn bevinding dat participanten het belangrijk vinden dat ze in hun religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling geaccepteerd en niet veroordeeld worden vanwege de weg die ze gaan.

In het slothoofdstuk, hoofdstuk 8, concludeer ik als antwoord op de centrale onderzoeksvraag dat de resultaten van het onderzoeksproject laten zien dat de religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling van reformatorisch opgevoede jongvolwassenen een dynamisch ontwikkelingspad is. Ondanks het feit dat jongvolwassenen monoreligieus gesocialiseerd zijn, kan dit pad verschillende richtingen opgaan: binnen en buiten het christelijk geloof. De bevindingen met betrekking tot de verschillende commitments illustreren dit. Ook kan de identiteitsontwikkeling van deze jongvolwassenen worden geïnterpreteerd als een proces dat sterk wordt beïnvloed en gevormd

door (ervaringen met) hun reformatorische opvoeding. Zowel de bevindingen over exploratieprocessen en gevoelens van niet goed genoeg zijn, als perceptie van participanten op contextuele invloeden, geven hier meer inzicht in. Temeer lijken de gevoelens van niet goed genoeg zijn onder participanten een langdurig gevolg te zijn van deze invloed. Verder bediscussieer ik in hoofdstuk 8 de bevindingen en breng ik deze in gesprek met vigerende beelden in het publieke debat en de literatuur over jongvolwassenen die reformatorisch opgevoed zijn en met de literatuur over religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling. Ook ga ik in op de praktische implicaties van het onderzoek voor opvoeders binnen gezin, school en kerk. Verder reflecteer ik op de concepten *religieuze identiteit* en *religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling*, op mijn methodologie, en op het gehele onderzoeksproject en mijn positie daarin.

Vervolgonderzoek

Dit onderzoeksproject is mijns inziens geen eindpunt, maar een startpunt voor verder onderzoek. In hoofdstuk 8 noem ik vier specifieke aandachtspunten voor vervolgonderzoek. Allereerst is het belangrijk dat er longitudinaal onderzoek wordt gedaan naar reformatorisch opgevoede jongvolwassenen. In dit onderzoeksproject heb ik mij gericht op religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling in de leeftijdsfase van jongvolwassenheid, omdat deze fase als cruciaal wordt beschouwd voor dit proces. Religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling is echter een doorgaand proces en met longitudinaal onderzoek kunnen we dan ook zicht krijgen op eventuele veranderingen van commitments of hernieuwde periodes van exploratie. Het is ook mogelijk om een vervolgstudie te doen bij dezelfde populatie na bijvoorbeeld vijf of tien jaar (zie Carlsson et al., 2015; Marcia, 1976).

Ten tweede is het belangrijk dat er onderzoek wordt gedaan naar de vraag hoe participanten en de onderzoeker zelf worden gevormd door hun participatie in de narratieve interviews waarbij jongeren hun levensverhaal delen. Mijn ervaring met de interviews, evenals de ervaringen die participanten deelden, geven hiervoor aanleiding. Ten derde is het belangrijk dat toekomstige onderzoekers deze specifieke interventies includeren in hun onderzoeksdesign. Zo gebruikte ik visuele middelen in mijn interviews met jongvolwassenen, die waardevol bleken voor de studie van religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling. Ze nodigden de participanten uit om hun verhaal te delen, zichzelf te uiten en hun levensverhaal te ordenen. Ten vierde is het belangrijk dat toekomstige onderzoekers in kaart brengen hoe persoonlijke aspecten van participanten hun religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling hebben beïnvloed. De bevindingen wijzen er namelijk op dat zaken als interesses, karaktereigenschappen, opleidingsniveaus en de demografische omgeving waarin iemand is opgegroeid, de richting van een ontwikkelingspad mede hebben bepaald.

Tot slot

Ik beschouw mijn onderzoeksproject als een podium voor de verhalen en stemmen van jongvolwassenen die in een reformatorisch opvoedingsmilieu zijn opgegroeid.

Ik geloof dat het belangrijk en relevant is dat naar hen geluisterd wordt. Ik hoop dan ook dat het onderzoeksproject bijdraagt aan reflecties op de huidige praktijken van religieuze vorming en socialisatie, maar ook aan de percepties van deze specifieke populatie. Met name hoop ik dat deze reflecties uiteindelijk leiden tot meer steun en aanmoediging voor kinderen en jongeren, zodat zij hun eigen weg kunnen vinden in het proces van religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling.

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Appendixes

Appendix A — Questions and statements SurveyMonkey questionnaire

Question	Answer options
1. I am interested in participating in this research. The researcher may therefore contact me.	· yes · no
2. I am a	· man · woman
3. I am	· 22 years old · 23 years old · 24 years old · 25 years old · other (provide further explanation)
4. I went to a strictly Reformed secondary school.	· yes · no · other (provide further explanation)
5. I	· passed my pre-university exam · passed my senior general secondary education exam · passed my prevocational secondary education exam · other (provide further explanation)
6. If I had to describe myself, then I would say that currently I am	· Christian · non-Christian · I am not quite sure · other (provide further explanation)
7. If someone asks me: "are you strictly-Reformed?" I would say	· yes · no · other (provide further explanation)
8. I	· go to church every week · go to church regularly · go to church occasionally · do not go to church · other (provide further explanation)
9. I (you may tick more than one item)	· am working on my secondary vocational education degree · have my secondary vocational education degree · am working on my higher professional education degree · have my higher professional education degree · am working on my university education degree · have my university education degree · am working · other (provide further explanation)
10. My contact details are	· name · mail address · telephone number

Appendix B — Recruitment instructions school A

	Number of students selected that took exam on pre-university education level	Number of students selected that took exam on senior general secondary education level	Number of students selected that took exam on prevocational secondary education level
Senior year 2013	25 (former students are now 22 years old)	-	-
Senior year 2012	25 (former students are now 23 years old)	25 (former students are now 22 years old)	-
Senior year 2011	25 (former students are now 24 years old)	25 (former students are now 23 years old)	25 (former students are now 22 years old)
Senior year 2010	25 (former students are now 25 years old)	25 (former students are now 24 years old)	25 (former students are now 23 years old)
Senior year 2009	-	25 (former students are now 25 years old)	25 (former students are now 24 years old)
Senior year 2008	-	-	25 (former students are now 25 years old)

Appendix C — Recruitment instructions school B

	Number of parents selected whose children took exam on pre-university education level	Number of parents selected whose children took exam on senior general secondary education level	Number of students selected that took exam on prevocational secondary education level
Senior year 2013	50 (former students are now 22 years old)	-	-
Senior year 2012	50 (former students are now 23 years old)	50 (former students are now 22 years old)	-
Senior year 2011	50 (former students are now 24 years old)	50 (former students are now 23 years old)	50 (former students are now 22 years old)
Senior year 2010	50 (former students are now 25 years old)	50 (former students are now 24 years old)	50 (former students are now 23 years old)
Senior year 2009	-	50 (former students are now 25 years old)	50 (former students are now 24 years old)
Senior year 2008	-	-	50 (former students are now 25 years old)

Appendix D — Interview guidelines

These interview guidelines are translated from Dutch into English. General follow-up questions for all interviews were: Why? How does that work/look like? What did you do? What happened then? Could you provide an example? What does it mean to you? How does it make you feel? Could you please tell me more about that? How is your [religious identification] involved with that? What has your strictly Reformed upbringing to do with that?

Interview 1—Current religious identity commitments

Open questions (perceptions of current religious identity commitment):[33]

- We will talk about who you are now, about your outlook on life, and what the Christian faith means or does not mean to you now. Please tell, with the help of the photos you selected, who are you?
- You identified yourself as [religious identification: Christian, non-Christian, etc.]. Imagine that I would follow you for a while; what would I see and experience in your daily life? Just take a weekday: what do you do and why? And what not? And take me to the weekend . . .

RIC beliefs, practices, and values

1. Which choices do you make? And how do these choices relate to your religious identification?

RIC and the context

2. How do your parents/family members/friends feel about how you live your life? Are there differences between your lifestyle and theirs? What do you think about that, and what do they think about that?

RIC beliefs, practices, values

3. When someone would ask you, "what do you believe?" how would you answer?
4. What, according to you, is the core of you being [religious identification]? What do you consider important in life? Think about beliefs, values, and norms.

RIC practices and experience

5. What is the role of the Bible in your life? How does this turn out in your life?
6. Do you pray? How important is prayer in your life? When do you pray, and why? And when you pray, what do you pray for? What does it mean for you to pray?

33 In the remaining text: RIC.

Experience of RIC

7. Do you have (memorable) religious or spiritual experiences, like you experience God or something special? Could you please tell me about such experiences?

Expression of RIC

8. Are you involved with a church/organizations/events/associations? What does this involvement mean to you?
9. Do you feel involved with other Christians/people who live their lives in the same way you do? How and when?

Contextual influences on RIC

10. Who or what is currently of influence on who you are as [religious identification]? This influence can be either negative or positive.

Motivation for RIC

11. Think about what you narrated about who you are and how you live your life as [religious identification]. When someone would ask you, "why do you live your life this way," what would you say? Why is this way so important to you, and what does it mean to you?

Agency in development of RIC

12. Is this way of life something you chose, or did it just turn out this way? Why? If it is a choice: do you consider it important that you chose it?

RIC strength

13. How would you respond when your way of living would cause trouble? Do you think you would keep holding on to this way? Why would you do that, or why not?
14. How do you try to hold on to your way of life in your everyday life?

PAUSE

RIC exploration

15. Please tell me, do you talk with others about your way of life? With whom do you talk and about what? Do you get into arguments or discussions? What does that mean to you?
16. Do you ever try out something new?
17. Do you currently have questions or doubts concerning who you are and your way of living as [religious identification]? Or are you insecure about it? What type of things do you question or doubt? How serious are these questions to you? How did these questions and doubts arise? Where do you search for answers? Do you feel you receive answers to your questions?
18. You just told me that you currently are [religious identification]. Do you ever consider other beliefs or another way of living—for example, other religions?

RIC salience

19. When someone would ask you, on a 10-point scale, how important do you see your beliefs/religious identification/way of living to you in your life (ten means "extremely important" and one means "not at all important"), what would you say? Why is your [religious identification] important to you, and what precisely is important?
20. When someone would ask you, on a 10-point scale, how important to you is practicing your [religious identification] (ten means "extremely important" and one means "not at all important") in your life, what would you say? Why is your [religious identification] important to you, and what precisely is important?

RIC beliefs

21. Please tell me, who is God according to you?
22. And could you explain what, according to you, the purpose of your life is?

Interview 2—The process of religious identity development

Open questions (the life story of religious identity development):[34]

- In this interview, we go back in time, and we will discuss how you became the way you are now. Could you thus take me on a journey through your life until now and tell me how you became the way you are now, considering that you identified yourself as [religious identification]?
- And could you please first draw a timeline of your life and write down the most important events and moments in your religious identity development? While drawing this timeline, we will discuss, step by step, your life story until now.
- How did your life look when you were born? Please describe in what kind of contexts and family you grew up. What did being a Christian mean to your life in this life phase? What did you consider important, and what did you do? And how was it in primary school? And in secondary school? And after that?

Changes, stability, the context, and saliency in RID

1. What changed in your RID, and what remained stable? What do you feel about this, and how do parents/family members and other people feel about it?
2. When was being Christian important to you for the first time? And when did it become less important?

Experiences in RID

3. Have you ever had (memorable) religious or spiritual experiences, such as experiencing God or something special? Could you please tell me about such experiences?

34 In the remaining text: RID.

Expression of RIC in RID

4. Did you make a public confession of your faith? What did it mean to you?

Turning points and the context in RID

5. When you look back on your life, please tell me about a moment/period you experienced as a high point in your life. And how is this moment/period related to your religious identification and upbringing?
6. When you look back on your life, please tell me about a moment/period you experienced as a low point in your life. And how is this moment/period related to your religious identification and upbringing?

Agency in RID

7. Did you feel that you could do and think what you want? How did that turn out in your life?

Contextual influences on RID

8. You just took me on a journey through your life up to who you are now. Imagine someone would ask you: "who or what influenced you in this process?" This influence can be either negative or positive.
9. Who or what was most influential?

PAUSE

Exploration in RID

10. Please tell me, did you talk with others about your way of life? With whom did you talk and about what? Do you get into arguments or discussions? What did that mean to you?
11. Did you ever try out something that what not allowed to do?
12. Could you tell about a period in life when you asked questions, when you did not understand things, doubted, or were insecure about who you were and your way of living as [religious identification]? What type of things did you question or doubt? How serious were these questions to you? How did these questions and doubts arise? Where did you search for answers? Do you feel you received answers to your questions?
13. Did you consider other beliefs or another way of living in the past—for example, other religions?

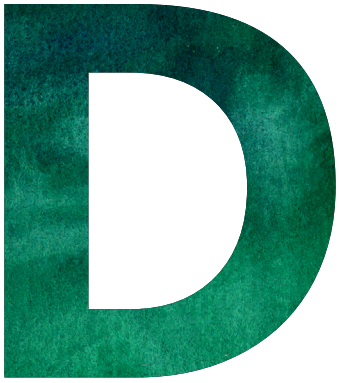
Stability and strength of RIC, and further RID

14. Please take me on a journey to the future, when you are 35/40. Please describe, what does your life look like then?
15. Do you think you will still be [religious identification]? Would things be changed or remain the same? What precisely?

16. If things will change, in what direction? How likely is it that things will change?

Perceptions of an ideal RID process

17. Imagine you have children of your own. What would you consider important for their religious identity development?
18. How do you perceive your own role in this process?
19. What would you do similarly to how your parents raised you? And what would you do differently?



Dankwoord
[Acknowledgements]

Dankwoord [Acknowledgements]

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Curriculum Vitae

Curriculum Vitae

Anne-Marije de Bruin-Wassinkmaat (Oene, 1990) completed her secondary education in 2008 at Van Lodenstein College in Amersfoort, one of the seven strictly Reformed secondary schools in the Netherlands. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree in Theology from Utrecht University, along with a teaching qualification for religious studies in secondary education. She became a secondary school teacher in Hilversum and continued her university studies at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. There, she obtained her Master of Science degree in Educational Pedagogy in 2014. Since that year, she has worked as an educational advisor for the educational advice center of Driestar Christian University in Gouda. She is involved in pedagogical and didactical training for secondary school teachers. In addition, she is involved in trajectories on Christian schools' identity, both on the organizational level and the classroom level. Since 2017, she has conducted her PhD research at the Protestant Theological University Amsterdam (Practical Theology Department), the Research Centre of Youth, Church and Culture (PThU), and Driestar Christian University.

Anne-Marije de Bruin-Wassinkmaat is married to Thomas de Bruin. Together with their daughter Jonne-mei (2018), and son Joshua (2021) they live in Woerden.