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Being Young and Strictly Religious: A Review of the Literature on the Religious Identity Development of Strictly Religious Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Strictly religious adolescents grow up in highly religious contexts with orthodox beliefs and practices that usually contrast with those of pluralist and secularized societies that can be perceived as promoting unhealthy religious identity development. For these adolescents, religious identity development may be a challenge; however, there seems to be a lack of theoretical and empirical understanding of how these adolescents develop their religious identities. To address this, a literature review was conducted, and 15 studies were selected after the application of selection criteria. This review focuses on the characteristics of these studies to understand the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents. Implications for theory development and further empirical research are discussed.

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, Dollahite, & Marks, 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, Assor, & Kaplan, 2009; Schachter, 2004; Visser-Vogel, De Kock, Barnard, & Bakker, 2015; Visser-Vogel, Westerink, De Kock, Barnard, & Bakker, 2012).

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" and makes dedicated claims and commitments an essential part of this process (Erikson, 1968, p. 31). 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 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).

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Keywords religious identity, religious identity development, religious identity formation, religious exploration, religious commitment, religious internalization, religious socialization, religious maturation, religious development, faith development, spiritual development, spiritual formation, spiritual maturation (all keywords were truncated in order to broaden the search)

AND: orthodox, conservative, highly, strictly, observant, devoted

AND (in case of too many results): adolescent (truncated)*

*At random, we combined the keywords with *young adults*, however, this generated no relevant search results. Therefore, these results are not included in the overview below.

| ATLA, ERIC and PsycINFO: n = 427. | Web of Science: n = 604. | Articles excluded: n = 981. Reasons: - Double references n = 317. - Based on reading title and abstract n = 664. |

Number of articles selected for a screening of the body of the text: n = 50.
Articles recommended by the research group: n = 3.
n = 53 (total).

Second inclusion criterion: articles that gained insight into the religious or spiritual identity development/formation/commitment/ internalization/socialization of strictly/orthodox/conservative/highly religious/observant/devoted adolescents.

→ Articles excluded based on content: n = 39.

Number of articles identified for a screening of cross-references: n = 14.

→ Cross-reference articles included: n = 9.

Number of articles selected for a (renewed) screening of the body of the text: n = 23.

→ Articles excluded based on content: n = 8.

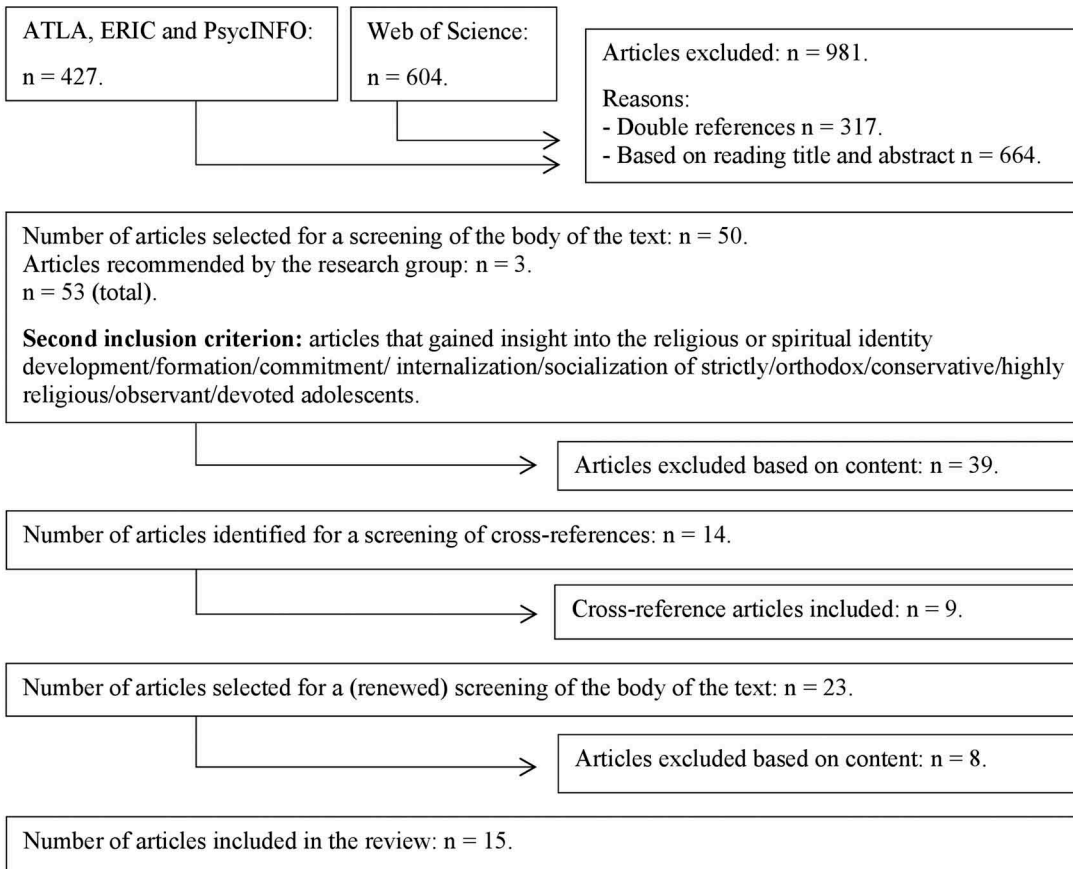Number of articles included in the review: n = 15.

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 1). 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 1). 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 1 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

Table 1. 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.
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 experiences involved.

Table 1. (Continued).

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/objective	Methods	N + participants	Country	Main findings
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.
Dollahite and 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 and the Religious Beliefs Questionnaire	N= 78 10th graders studying in Jewish dormitory institutions	Israel	• There is a positive and significant relationship between religious belief and general ego identity.

(Continued)

Table 1. (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.
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 for the 10th graders. • There were significantly higher scores for the 11th graders for faith identity and religious behavior than for 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 1. (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.
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.

(Continued)

Table 1. (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 and 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.
Schachter and 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.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Author (s) (year)	Main theoretical perspective and terminology	Aim/objective	Methods	N + participants	Country	Main findings
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.
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.

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.

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, Schachter, & Rich, 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, Hardy, & Dollahite, 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, Lester, & Brooks, 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 respondent 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 high-lighted 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 respondent 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, Hermans, and De Jong (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.

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