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

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the religious identity commitments of 18 emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. During in-depth narrative interviews with photo elicitation, the participants reflected on who they are and the meaning of religion to their identity. Our thematic data analysis reveals that the participants' religious identity commitments are diverse and diffuse, although they all were religiously socialised in more or less the same way. It, therefore, is inadequate to label the participants as Christian or not and as strictly Reformed or not. Second, the analysis reveals four commitments to trusting God, self, rational belief and not knowing yet.

KEYWORDS

Religious identity commitment; emerging adulthood; strictly Reformed; the Netherlands

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 2006; Erikson 1964; Fivush 2013; Hunt 2005; Negru, Haragâș, and Mustea 2014; Niemelä 2015;

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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).¹

In this study, therefore, we scientifically investigate strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults and their religious identity commitments. Based on interviews with 18 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 conceptualise religious identity commitments, we build on Erikson's identity theory as operationalised by Marcia (1966) and further developed by identity researchers (Crocetti, Rubini, and Meeus 2008; De Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. 2019; Luyckx et al. 2006). We 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 behaviour. 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 and 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 and 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 conceptualisation of commitment as a choice concerning beliefs, values, practices and behaviours within the religious identity domain. Based on our data, we propose that this definition is too static and narrow (McLean and 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 socialised 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 conceptualisation 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 characterised as subcultures that transmit and imposes orthodox Christian beliefs and practices. The core beliefs of the strictly Reformeds, following the *Nadere Reformatie*,² 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 (Van Belzen 2008; Van der Veer and Janse 2016; Exalto 2007). 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 and Janse 2016). Regarding religious practices, children go to church twice on Sunday from a young age, attend catechism class³ and strictly Reformed schools and grow up surrounded by a strictly Reformed newspaper, political party and organisations. 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

Approach

For several reasons, we adopted a narrative approach to the study of religious identity commitments, and we used qualitative methods to explore the autobiographical stories of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts. First, through storytelling, the emerging adults' religious identity commitments became apparent as they constructed their religious identities and reflected on the meaning of religion in their lives (Alisat and Pratt 2012; De Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. 2019; Schachter 2004). Second, a narrative approach appeared to be suitable for the empirical investigation of religious identity commitments as it offered:

the necessary biographical context for addressing individual religiousness in the context of personal concerns, experiences, and orientations, thus stressing the diversity and varieties of people's religious orientations and experiences which are embedded in processes of reflection and interpretation, related to activities in daily life. (Popp-Baier 2013, 155)

Thus, following our research aims, studying narratives facilitated a deeper understanding of the participants' religious identity commitments and the meaning of religion to their identities and lives (Popp-Baier 2013; Van Belzen 2008).

Instruments

In line with the narrative approach, we conducted in-depth interviews exploring the emerging adults' current religious identity commitments. We developed the interview guidelines based on our theoretical framework and existing interview guidelines⁴ and adjusted them in response to our research questions, two pilot interviews and discussions with other researchers. The semi-structured guidelines included key questions addressing the concepts behind our research question and open-ended questions inviting the participants to narrate their religious identity commitment and their religious identity development.

To facilitate storytelling and to reduce the power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees, we decided to use a visual tool as an instrument (Hatten, Forin, and Adams 2013; Mustafa 2014; Robinson 2002). To examine the participants' current religious identity commitments, before their interviews, they were asked to select eight photos representing who they were based on their strictly Reformed upbringing and the current meaning of religion in their lives. At the beginning of their interviews, the interviewer gave them the printed photos and asked them to narrate what these photos told about them. The photos thus served as the starting point of the interviews.

Participants

We recruited emerging adults ages 22–25 years old⁵ who were former students of two strictly Reformed secondary schools in the Netherlands, one situated in a more mono-religious rural area and one in a more pluralist urban area. The strictly Reformed schools' admissions policies guaranteed that the participants had had a conforming education. We chose emerging adults in this age group as emerging adulthood is perceived to be a crucial phase in identity development. Moreover, at this age, we expected that the participants would have a period of life to review and would be able to reflect on their religious identity commitments (McAdams and Zapata-Gietl 2015; Özdikmenli-Demir and Şahin-Kütük 2012).

We asked the schools to send former students an email informing them about the research and inviting those interested to fill out an online survey. The responses revealed three participant profiles: emerging adults who identified as Christian and strictly Reformed; who identified Christian but not strictly Reformed or who did not yet know whether they were; and who identified as non-Christian/non-religious. Of the 93 viable survey responses, we interviewed 18 participants – six from each participant

profile – to recruit a diverse sample with differences in gender, education levels and profiles.

Procedure

The first author of this article interviewed each participant twice from April 2018 to April 2019. The first interviews focused on the participants' current religious identities, and the second interviews investigated religious identity development throughout their lives. The interviews took place in their participants' own homes as we believed that they would feel most comfortable in this setting. Participants were paid €50 for their participation in the study. The average length of the interviews was approximately three hours, and the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. After every interview, the interviewer wrote a report including reflections on the interview setting and content and the flow of conversation, which functioned as the first step in the analysis process.

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, 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 organising, grouping and merging the codes, we developed a more organised code list with main codes and subcodes that described the higher-level meanings of the data segments. After completing coding, we further analysed the codes that gave insights into the participants' religious identity commitments: codes on the subjects, 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 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 socialised in generally the same way, we observed that they had highly diverse and diffuse religious identity commitments. It, therefore, was too simplistic to categorise 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 characterise 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 subjects 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 characterise 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:

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 characterised 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 characterised 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 characterised 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 personalising 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 characterised 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 socialised 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 characterise 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 characterisation of commitment is in line with Layton, Dollahite, and Hardy (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-centred, 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 behaviour, 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 subjects 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 characterise 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 18 emerging adults prevents generalising the findings. However, with an in-depth exploration of the religious identity commitments of strictly Reformed-raised adolescents in the Netherlands, this 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).

Notes

1. *Reformatorsch Dagblad*.
2. 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 strove to keep personal behaviour and experiences within the norms of religious doctrine’ (Van Belzen 2008, 125).
3. This weekly class teaches teenagers and adolescents about the Bible and the Dutch Reformed Confession, including the Dutch Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and Canons of Dordt or Five Articles against the Remonstrants.
4. These were Visser-Vogel’s (2015) interview guidelines, based on the Identity Status Interview (Marcia et al. 1993) and the narrative Faith, Politics and Life Story interview protocol (Foley Center for the Study of Lives 2005).
5. At the time of the interviews, all the participants were 23–25 years old.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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