Religious Identity Exploration in the Life Stories of Strictly Reformed-Raised Emerging Adults in the Netherlands

Anne-Marije de Bruin-Wassinkmaat
Department of Practical Theology, Protestant Theological University,
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Driestar Christian University for Teacher Education, Gouda,
The Netherlands
a.r.de.bruin-wassinkmaat@pthu.nl

Jos de Kock
Department of Practical Theology, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit,
Leuven, Belgium
jos.dekock@etf.edu

Elsbeth Visser-Vogel
Christian University of Applied Sciences, Ede, The Netherlands
evisser@che.nl

Cok Bakker
Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands
c.bakker@uu.nl

Marcel Barnard
Department of Practical Theology, Protestant Theological University,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Department of Practical Theology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch,
South Africa
mbarnard@pthu.nl

Abstract

This article presents the findings from a qualitative study on the religious identity exploration processes and experiences of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. We discuss three forms of exploration that appeared in our data: asking questions, exploring alternatives and rebelling against things that are disallowed or undesirable in the strictly Reformed tradition. We also discuss patterns that emerged from our analysis of exploration related to participants' current religious identity commitments and a strictly Reformed upbringing. Finally, we discuss our findings and propose directions for further research and implications for those who guide youth in religious identity development.

Keywords

1   Introduction*

Exploration is perceived as crucial to the development of a healthy, mature, intrinsically motivated identity commitment.[1] 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 sceptically about previous held beliefs."[2] 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,

---

*   The first author conducted the empirical study and elaborated the contents of the article. The second authors were supervisors in the empirical study, and in completion and editing of the article.

1   Stephen Armet, "Religious Socialization and Identity Formation of Adolescents in High Tension Religions," *Review of Religious Research* 50, no. 3 (2009): 281; Maya Cohen-Malayev, Avi Assor, and Avi Kaplan, "Religious Exploration in a Modern World: The Case of Modern-Orthodox Jews in Israel," *Identity* 9, no. 3 (2009): 246; Emily Layton, Sam A. Hardy, and David C. Dollahite, "Religious Exploration among Highly Religious American Adolescents," *Identity* 12, no. 2 (2012): 178.

2   Pamela Ebstyne King, "Religion and Identity: The Role of Ideological, Social, and Spiritual Contexts," *Applied Developmental Science* 7, no. 3 (2003): 198.

for example, by the introduction of various views and practices.[3] 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.[4]

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 centred in but not bounded to emerging adulthood. With Arnett, 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.[5] 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.[6] 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.[7]

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.[8] Still, much less is known about how exploration processes unfold and are experienced by those involved.[9] Therefore, this study examines the life story accounts of

---

3   Sara K. Johnson et al., "Emerging Adults' Identity Exploration: Illustrations from Inside the 'Camp Bubble'," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 26, no. 2 (2011): 289; King, "Religion and Identity," 199; Layton, Hardy, and Dollahite, "Religious Exploration among Highly Religious," 182.

4   Anne-Marije de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., "Being Young and Strictly Religious: A Review of the Literature on the Religious Identity Development of Strictly Religious Adolescents," *Identity* 19, no. 1 (2019): 13; King, "Religion and Identity," 202.

5   Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8.

6   Elisabeth Crocetti, "Identity Formation in Adolescence: The Dynamic of Forming and Consolidating Identity Commitments," *Child Development Perspectives* 11, no. 2 (2017): 145; Layton, Hardy, and Dollahite, "Religious Exploration among Highly Religious," 158.

7   Elsbeth Visser-Vogel, "Religious Identity Development of Orthoprax Muslim Adolescents in the Netherlands," PhD diss. (Utrecht University, the Netherlands, 2015).

8   Cohen-Malayev, Assor, and Kaplan, "Religious Exploration in a Modern World," 241–245; Layton, Hardy, and Dollahite, "Religious Exploration among Highly Religious," 165; Visser-Vogel, "Religious Identity Development," 78–87.

9   Ruthellen Josselson and Hanoch Flum, "Identity Status: On Refinding the People," in *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development*, eds. Kate C. McLean and Moin Syed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 136; E. Saskia Kunnen and Marijke Metz, "Commitment and Exploration: Need for a Developmental Approach," in *The Oxford Handbook of Identity*

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 characterised 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, organisations and a newspaper but also in the public sphere, as the strictly Reformed have their own political party.

1.1   *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?

2   Methods

This study is part of a larger research project in which we qualitatively explore the religious identity development of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands focusing on commitments, explorations and the influence of contextual factors. In this project, we adopted a qualitative, narrative research method to acquire the in-depth understanding we sought of participants' religious identity development.[10] We propose that religious identity development is a narrative process in nature, implying that telling life stories and reflecting on the past, present and future reveals commitments, explorations, and contextual influences.[11] Moreover, this method suits the study of under-researched, minority or even marginalised populations, which we assume applies to our population of emerging adults.[12]

2.1   *Population and Sample*

We recruited the former students of strictly Reformed secondary schools because such schools have admission policies that guarantee their students grow up in a strictly Reformed context. The former students received e-mails

---

      Development, eds. Kate C. McLean and Moin Syed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 128.

10   Josselson and Flum, "Identity Status," 136, 143.

11   De Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., "Being Young," 16.

12   R. Ruard Ganzevoort, "Introduction. Religious Stories We Live by," in *Religious Stories We Live by. Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies*, eds. R. Ruard Ganzevoort, Maaike de Haardt, and Michael Scherer-Rath (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 3; Kat Kolar et al., "Timeline

explaining the research project and were asked to participate. Those willing to participate completed an online survey with demographic questions and questions about the participants' current identifications with labels like "strictly Reformed" and "Christian." Of all the responses, ninety-three were viable; of these, we sampled eighteen participants 22–25 years old,[13] thereby considering variation in gender, educational level and religious identification. We supposed that with this sample size we were able to conduct the in-depth investigation of religious identity development we sought. Also, we supposed that emerging adults of this age would be able to construct their life story and reflect on their religious identity development.[14]

2.2 *Procedure and Instruments*

We interviewed all eighteen participants twice in depth between April 2018 and April 2019. The first interviews concerned participants' current religious identity commitments, and the second concerned their process of religious identity development. Each interview lasted approximately three hours and was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. When possible, the interviews took place in their homes, since we expected that then participants would feel most comfortable and there would be minimal distractions. We rewarded all participants with 50 euros for both interviews.

For the interviews, we used semi-structured guidelines that consisted of open-ended questions, such as questions about participants' life stories, and key questions that reflected the themes that were important to our research project, such as commitment and exploration. We based these guidelines on our theoretical framework and Visser-Vogel's interview guidelines, and we included visual tools in our instruments, like self-chosen photos and timeline drawing, because they help elicit storytelling, especially in cases of sensitive, personal topics.[15] In life story interviews, timelines are often valuable to help participants organise experiences chronologically, considering that overviewing and reflecting on one's entire life can be difficult.[16] Moreover, timelines

---

Mapping in Qualitative Interviews: A Study of Resilience with Marginalized Groups," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 14, no. 3 (2015): 15.

13   At the time of the interviews, all the participants were 23–25 years old.

14   Tilmann Habermas and Christin Köber, "Autobiographical Reasoning is Constitutive for Narrative Identity: The Role of the Life Story for Personal Continuity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development*, eds. Kate C. McLean and Moin Syed (NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 155; Dan P. McAdams, "Three Lines of Personality Development: A Conceptual Itinerary," *European Psychologist* 20, no. 4 (2015): 252–254.

15   Visser-Vogel, "Religious Identity Development," 207–212; Kolar et al., "Timeline Mapping," 15.

16   Hanne Kristine Adriansen, "Timeline Interviews: A Tool for Conducting Life History Research," *Qualitative Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 43.

enable interviewees to "take ownership by drawing and writing," transforming the interviewee into a co-constructor in the process of interviewing.[17]

The second interviews focused on the process of religious identity development and form the basis of this article. They started with asking the participant to draw a timeline of their life on flipchart paper and to narrate their life story. It was emphasised that there were no rules concerning timeline drawing and that the timeline did not need to be aesthetically "good," and was just a means to reflect on their religious identity development. While narrating, each interviewee filled their timeline with events, moments, situations and periods that were significant to their religious identity development. After completing the timeline, we asked key questions about, for example, whether participants have had questions or doubts, what triggered these questions and doubts, and how they dealt with them.

2.3 *Analysis*

We analysed 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.[18] 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 analysed the exploration codes, looking for patterns and themes concerning exploration, thereby moving from description to interpretation. In this step, we analysed 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.[19] 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.

---

17   Adriansen, "Timeline Interviews," 48.

18   Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 87.

19   Anne-Marije de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., "Religious Identity Commitments of Emerging Adults Raised in Strictly Reformed Contexts in the Netherlands," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 42, no 2. (2021): 3. De Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., "Being Young," 12.

3   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 1) while discussing the findings of the present study.[20] 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

TABLE 1   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

20   De Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., "Religious Identity Commitments."

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."

3.1   *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 categorised these questions and found that three categories were prominent (see Table 2) and almost all concerned the Christian faith or the strictly Reformed interpretation of it.

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 world-views, 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.

3.1.1 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.

TABLE 2   Question categories

Strictly Reformed interpretation: beliefs, practices, rules and education

Understanding:

– *Why do we [as strictly Reformed Christians] believe the way we believe? Why do we baptise 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?*

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?*

TABLE 2 (*cont.*)

Strictly Reformed interpretation: beliefs, practices, rules and education

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?*

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 par-
ticipants' unsuccessful attempts to meet the ideal standards of their strictly
Reformed educations. 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 partici-
pants' current commitments, as the questions resulted in a trusting God com-
mitment: being converted or having a personal relationship with God. This
commitment, however, does not imply that participants resolved their uncer-
tainties, 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, narrat-
ing 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 sali-
ent 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. (...) Ehm, yes, at a certain moment, I stopped search- I stopped searching.

3.2 *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."

3.2.1 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 realised 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 philosophising 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.

3.3   *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 behaviour: 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 behaviour 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 behaviourally 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."

3.3.1   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 behaviour 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 behaviour 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.

4 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 characterised 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" and "conscious and deliberate making choices."[21] The question category about participants' religious identities reflects aspects of the style "exploration in depth."[22] Likewise, the fundamental questions concerning Christianity could be perceived as questions that match the "radical exploration" style.[23] 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 characterised as exploration in breadth, as participants explored ideas and perceptions – including religions – different from the strictly Reformed interpretation in which they were raised.[24] 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 characterise 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.[25] A possible explanation for this narrow exploration might be that strictly Reformed contexts hardly provided alternatives that participants could explore.

---

21   Cohen-Malayev, Assor, and Kaplan, "Religious Exploration in a Modern World," 241–242; Visser-Vogel, "Religious Identity Development," 82–84.

22   Visser-Vogel, "Religious Identity Development," 79–81.

23   Cohen-Malayev, Assor, and Kaplan, "Religious Exploration in a Modern World," 242–244.

24   Koen Luyckx et al., "Unpacking Commitment and Exploration: Preliminary Validation of an Integrative Model of Late Adolescent Identity Formation," *Journal of Adolescence* 29, no. 3 (2006): 364.

25   Alan S. Waterman, "What Does It Mean to Engage in Identity Exploration and to Hold Identity Commitments? A Methodological Critique of Multidimensional Measures for the Study of Identity Processes," *Identity* 15, no. 4 (2015): 317.

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 behaviour appeared to be short periods of experimentation simultaneous with religious practices, corresponding to what Visser-Vogel (2015) called an "exploration process isolated from commitment."[26]

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 not 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 behaviour, 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

---

26   Visser-Vogel, "Religious Identity Development," 84–87.

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 behaviour 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.[27] 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.[28]

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.[29]

---

27   King, "Religion and Identity," 202.
28   Armet, "Religious Socialization," 281.
29   Layton, Hardy, and Dollahite, "Religious Exploration among Highly Religious," 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 generalisation 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.

Biographical notes of authors

Anne-Marije de Bruin-Wassinkmaat MSc is a PhD-student at the Protestant Theological University Amsterdam. Her research focuses on the religious identity development of adolescents who grew up in a strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. Anne-Marije works as an educational advisor for Driestar Christian University and she is involved with pedagogical and didactical training for secondary school teachers. Besides, she is involved with the identity of Christian schools, both on organization level and classroom level.

Prof. Dr. A. (Jos) de Kock is Professor of Practical Theology at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit in Leuven, Belgium, where he also serves as the rector of the faculty. Currently, he is a board member of the International Academy of Practical Theology, and a board member of the Religious Education Association. His specializations are in the areas of empirical practical theology, research methodology, higher education, religious education, youth ministry, religious identity development, catechesis, and youth and theology.

Dr. E. (Elsbeth) Visser-Vogel is a lecturer at the Christelijke Hogeschool Ede (Christian University of Applied Sciences). Her specializations are in de areas

of religious identity development, adolescents, youth and (religious) education. Besides, she is as a supervisor involved with several research projects.

Prof. Dr. C. (Cok) Bakker is professor of Religious Education at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies of the Faculty of Humanities at Utrecht University and professor in the area of the Moral development of professionals at the HU Utrecht University of Applied Sciences. For max of one day a week he is involved in consultancy work (mainly dealing with religious diversity issues).

Prof. Dr. M (Marcel) Barnard is professor of Practical Theology at the Protestant Theological University (Amsterdam, the Netherlands) and Professor Extraordinary of Practical Theology at the University of Stellenbosch (South Africa). He is research leader of Practical Theology at the Protestant Theological University.

References

Adriansen, Hanne Kristine. "Timeline Interviews: A Tool for Conducting Life History Research." *Qualitative Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 40–55.

Armet, Stephen. "Religious Socialization and Identity Formation of Adolescents in High Tension Religions." *Review of Religious Research* 50, no. 3 (2009): 277–297.

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Braun, Viriginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

Cohen-Malayev, Maya, Avi Assor, and Avi Kaplan. "Religious Exploration in a Modern World: The Case of Modern-Orthodox Jews in Israel." *Identity* 9, no. 3 (2009): 233–251.

Crocetti, Elisabeth. "Identity Formation in Adolescence: The Dynamic of Forming and Consolidating Identity Commitments." *Child Development Perspectives* 11, no. 2 (2017): 145–150.

De Bruin-Wassinkmaat, Anne-Marije, Jos De Kock, Elsbeth Visser-Vogel, Cok Bakker, and Marcel Barnard. "Being Young and Strictly Religious: A Review of the Literature on the Religious Identity Development of Strictly Religious Adolescents." *Identity* 19, no. 1 (2019): 62–79.

De Bruin-Wassinkmaat, Anne-Marije, Jos De Kock, Elsbeth Visser-Vogel, Cok Bakker, and Marcel Barnard. "Religious Identity Commitments of Emerging Adults Raised in Strictly Reformed Contexts in the Netherlands." *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 42, no. 2 (2021): 149–162.

Ganzevoort, R. Ruard. "Introduction. Religious Stories We Live by." In *Religious Stories We Live by. Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies*, edited by R. Ruard Ganzevoort, Maaike de Haardt, and Michael Scherer-Rath . Leiden: Brill, 2014.

Habermas, Tilmann and Köber Christin. "Autobiographical Reasoning is Constitutive for Narrative Identity: The Role of the Life Story for Personal Continuity." In *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development*, edited by Kate C. McLean and Moin Syed . New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Johnson, Sara K., Jane A. Goldman, Anita I. Garey, Preston A. Britner, and Shannon E. Weaver. "Emerging Adults' Identity Exploration: Illustrations from Inside the 'Camp Bubble'." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 26, no. 2 (2011): 258–295.

Josselson, Ruthellen, and Hanoch Flum. "Identity Status: On Refinding the People." In *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development*, edited by Kate C. McLean and Moin Syed . New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

King, Pamela Ebstyne. "Religion and Identity: The Role of Ideological, Social, and Spiritual Contexts." *Applied Developmental Science* 7, no. 3 (2003): 197–204.

Kolar, Kat, Farah Ahmed, Linda Chan, and Patricia C. Erickson. "Timeline Mapping in Qualitative Interviews: A Study of Resilience with Marginalized Groups." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 14, no. 3 (2015): 13–32.

Kunnen, E. Saskia, and Marijke Metz. "Commitment and Exploration: Need for a Developmental Approach." In *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development*, edited by Kate C. McLean and Moin Syed . New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Layton, Emily, Sam A. Hardy, and David C. Dollahite. "Religious Exploration among Highly Religious American Adolescents." *Identity* 12, no. 2 (2012): 157–184.

Luyckx, Koen, Luc Goossens, Bart Soenens, and Wim Beyers. "Unpacking Commitment and Exploration: Preliminary Validation of an Integrative Model of Late Adolescent Identity Formation." *Journal of Adolescence* 29, no. 3 (2006): 61–378.

McAdams, Dan P. "Three Lines of Personality Development: A Conceptual Itinerary." *European Psychologist* 20, no. 4 (2015): 252–254.

Visser-Vogel, Elsbeth. "Religious Identity Development of Orthoprax Muslim Adolescents in the Netherlands." PhD diss., Utrecht University, the Netherlands, 2015.

Waterman, Alan S. "What Does It Mean to Engage in Identity Exploration and to Hold Identity Commitments? A Methodological Critique of Multidimensional Measures for the Study of Identity Processes." *Identity* 15, no. 4 (2015): 309–349.