

## **FLUID AND FRAGILE, OR IN BETWEEN: CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN CRISIS?**

### **Perspectives from Pastoral Psychology**

#### Abstract

To be alive means to struggle with and to balance between identity and difference. In today's society this process seems to be even more difficult and risky for the individual. The rise of 'identitarian' political movements indicates that the question of identity has not yet passed its zenith. Young adults still struggle to find their place in society while figuring out their norms and values. Pastoral Theology and Religious Education need to understand how people construct their identity, whether and how this implies religiousness and religious values. Since identity is a psychological term, the viewpoint of Pastoral Psychology is relevant. Narrativity and aestheticization have emerged as two broader directions regarding conceptualization of identity during the last decade.

In this article, two models of identity construction will be presented: the social psychological model of procedural identity (Keupp et al. 2006) and a model of identity as a process of formation (Pirker 2013) which summarizes various theoretical and empirical identity theories from different backgrounds. From there on, the connection between religion and identity as of inner religiousness and exterior ties will be discussed and related to research projects in Psychology of Religion (Verhoeven/ Hutsebaut 1995; Zehnder Grob /Morgenthaler 2013). The proposed contemporary metaphor of identity as fluid and fragile contains psychological, anthropological and theological sensitivity. Within this framework, the current processes of narrativity and aestheticization will become better understandable for matters of Religious Education.

*Key words: identity; identity process, identity formation; religious education; psychology.*

#### **Introduction**

The study of identity that was for a long time considered a key focus in Developmental Psychology, Pedagogics and Sociology, seems to have passed its zenith after the 1990s. Especially pedagogical thinking has

turned its back on the problem of identity in favour of negotiations of difference, diversity and ambiguity and the question of whether, and how, an understanding of the latter aspects might be developed in a better and more supportive way. Processes of identity got out of sight – only to make their vengeful return in the political language of recent years, e.g. in young political movements like “les identitaires” in France, the “identitäre Bewegung” in Austria and Germany and various other European countries: barely disguised, by their smooth talk about ethnopluralism, ethnoculturalism, regionalism and defence, their generally racist, discriminatory and nationalist ideology surfaces. The concept of identity, it seems, has been hijacked!

It would be easy to turn one’s back entirely on the barely recognisable and ill-used term of “identity”. Arguably, however, it may be high time to do the opposite. The lesson to be learned from the new ‘identitarian movements’ might well be that the psychological and social needs of “Selbstvergewisserung” must not be ignored. Also in light of, and in spite of its being held hostage by ill-inclined interest groups, the benefits of a solid psychological concept of identity have to be put in focus once more.

As a concept of personality, identity was originally related to notions of stability and finding a status of identity. The varying discourses on identity have gradually shifted towards an understanding of procedural identity. In the current political and social climate, the notion of fixed identity positions surfaces once more.

Religious education within families, communities and schools faces multiple challenges in present-day societies. To inquire into identity in the context of Religious Pedagogics implies inquiring into, and reflecting on, the development of social interaction and individual experience within the horizon of religious practice.

From the perspective of Pastoral Psychology, this article focuses on aspects related to both individual identity development and religious connectedness. A general model of identity gathers its understanding of identity from various theories, most of them psychological. This generalization from the viewpoint of Pastoral Psychology reveals the way people construct their identity and the part religion takes in this process.

The question of religious identity has to be asked in the context of a secular society, but within its scientific context: religiousness is just as fluent as many other aspects of identity. It cannot be relied on as exclusive provider of value or certainty any more.

Conversely, Christianity’s manifold influences on societies and their values are currently questioned and debated. But in these debates, the individual aspects have increasingly gotten out of sight. In what follows, I will not inquire into the relationship between Christian values and their cultural and moral implications. Rather, I will retrace these values once more within the individual.

Thus, I establish religious education as an ongoing identity formation that can be considered as empowerment strategy, i.e. a strategy of building one's life based on the principle of hope and change rather than sticking to supposed securities and certainties. Focussing on personal identity processes does not imply neglecting or discarding their relevance for national and global processes. On the contrary, the focus on the individual can help us understand and intervene in the current political processes that impact on the question of identity.

### **1. Identity in focus – viewed from pastoral psychology**

Discourses in Sociology, Philosophy, Psychology, Pedagogics, and also Practical and Empirical Theology in the former decades usually relate identity to questions of identity development, self-awareness and self-concepts, role-taking and role-making, ascriptions, identifications and interaction, recognition, identity diffusion and identity disorder.

Even though the concepts of identity vary widely in all these discourses, they share an understanding of identity as a concept that is continuously marked by the present: in all these concepts the individual mirrors the broader social situation. This implies that such surrounding features as pluralism, globalization, fragmentation or intercultural experience inevitably play their part in conceptualizations of individual identity.

Over the last decade two broader directions regarding conceptualization of identity have emerged: 1. *Aestheticization*, an aspect of practical philosophy, expands the goal of a succeeding identity process to the broader idea of the “Lebenskunst”<sup>1</sup>. This idea influenced Social Psychology and its idea of a well-formed identity.<sup>2</sup> Equally, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman looks at the present-day topic of the “art of life”<sup>3</sup>. 2. *Narrativity* implies that identity concepts are continuously generated from individual narratives which can change throughout the lifespan. They will never be terminated or finalized. Identity development theories discuss the question of whether a status of identity can be claimed at all. Identity grows and develops in and alongside narrations. The construction of identity turns out to be a highly individualized project carried out freely. On the other hand, the individual and its storytelling depend to a great extent on exterior conditions and relations.

Understanding how individuals construct their identity and tell their narratives is of great interest for all those working within the field of pastoral care and counseling. Pastoral Psychology, as a branch of Practical

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<sup>1</sup> W. Schmid, *Philosophie der Lebenskunst. Eine Grundlegung* Frankfurt/M., <sup>5</sup>1999.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H. Keupp et al., *Identitätskonstruktionen. Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, <sup>3</sup>2006.

<sup>3</sup> Z. Bauman, *The Art of Life*, Hoboken, 2008.

Theology, is responsible for providing and discussing in-depth analyses of changes and challenges in these fields. It is strongly related to psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge and research, yet in its academic outreach it is mainly perceived as the theological field. Its priority lies in the encounter of pastoral care and psychotherapy, spiritual formation and supervision. Pastoral Psychology can be understood as a transdisciplinary approach to the individuals interacting in these fields, as shown in Figure 1.<sup>4</sup> Its research and reflection keeps up to date with current findings. How do people see themselves in the present, which obstacles do they encounter? What can be said about their struggles regarding the way they make sense of their lives?

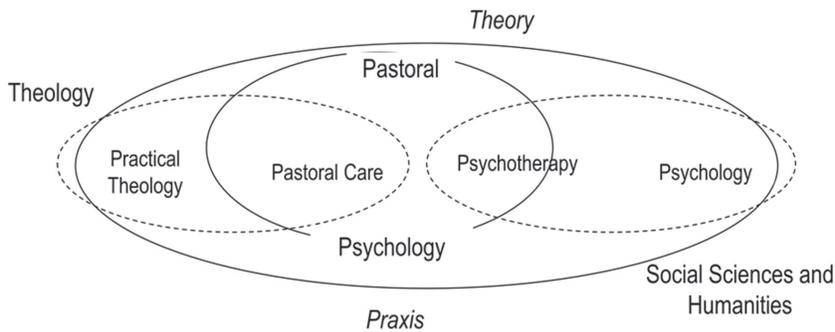


Figure 1. Pastoral Psychology between Practical Theology and Psychology

During the twentieth century, identity arose as a topic in Psychology in diverse schools and perspectives. It is related to the fundamental question: ‘Who am I – for myself and for the others, through time, relations and situations?’ In Social Psychology, the relation of Self, Ego and Identity has been seen through the eyes of George H. Mead<sup>5</sup> and his social behaviorist perspective. Erik H. Erikson introduced this question into Developmental Psychology as part of his psychoanalytic theory of psychosocial development comprising eight stages from infancy to adulthood.<sup>6</sup> Erikson understands the psychosocial development in eight crises, which a person has to overcome. One of them is the so-called ‘identity crises’ between identity and identity diffusion. Erikson’s assumption, that individuals have to reach a stable identity status in work, ideology and family roles by the end of adolescence, have turned out to be untenable. In fact, the iden-

<sup>4</sup> Cf. V. Pirker, *Fluide und fragil, Identität als Grundoption zeitsensibler Pastoralpsychologie*. Ostfildern, 2013, p. 307-320.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, Chicago, 1934.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. E. H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and crisis*, New York, 1968.

tity status is much more multifaceted and reversible. James E. Marcia<sup>7</sup> has distinguished four identity statuses along the individual's current self-assessment to crisis and commitment. Identity might be formed as foreclosure, identity diffusion, moratorium and identity achievement. In Germany, Lothar Krappmann<sup>8</sup> created a synopsis of both, Erikson and Mead, in order to develop a pedagogical orientation. All these theories point explicitly towards the individual, their inner motion and their sense of self, rather than focusing on relations to group processes and social affiliation. Centering on the individual provides a common ground for these diverse identity theories. Since identity emerges from the interplay between an individual's interior and exterior world and from the interactions a person grows up with (in Mead language: The 'I' vs. the 'Me'), identity can be related to terms such as visibility, continuity, coherence, recognizability, authenticity. Not surprisingly, the term identity is also used in the description of collectives, for example cultural, ethnic, gender or national identity.

### 1.1. Procedural identity

The Munich-based longitudinal study "Identitätskonstruktionen. Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne" by Heiner Keupp and his team received much attention over the last decade.<sup>9</sup> From the viewpoint of Social Psychology, the researchers tried to figure out how people construct their identities to a greater extent. Figure 2 shows the identity process of the Keupp's model.

Keupp's theory of "Construction of identities in late modernity" is built around the idea of a patchwork identity. He shows that the identity process continues throughout a person's life. From the mental health perspective, psychic stability implies a minimal degree of consistence regarding one's sense of identity. It points out the high complexity and dynamic of a continuously growing and changing identity process, which derives from short moments of interaction and self-reflection. From this "level of situational self-experience", some aspects converge on the "level of partial identities", such as work, family, body, culture, politics, gender. Again, some components of the latter can rise to the level of meta-identity, which includes biographical core narratives, "dominant partial identities" and the inner "sense of identity". Religiousness is not an explicit

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. E. Marcia et al. (eds.), *Ego identity. A handbook for psychosocial research*, New York, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. L. Krappmann, *Soziologische Dimensionen der Identität. Strukturelle Bedingungen für die Teilnahme an Interaktionsprozessen*, Stuttgart, 1971.

<sup>9</sup> Keupp et al. 2006; for an overview see Katharina Hametner / Amrei C. Joerche: Reflexive and Nonreflexive Identity Perceptions: Finding a Balance, in, *Psychology&Society*, 2,1 (2009), p. 22-28.

aspect of the Keupp's model; it is understood as an aspect of ideology. However, it can clearly be seen as an identity component in its own right, albeit among others, and may also be found on the level of meta-identity.

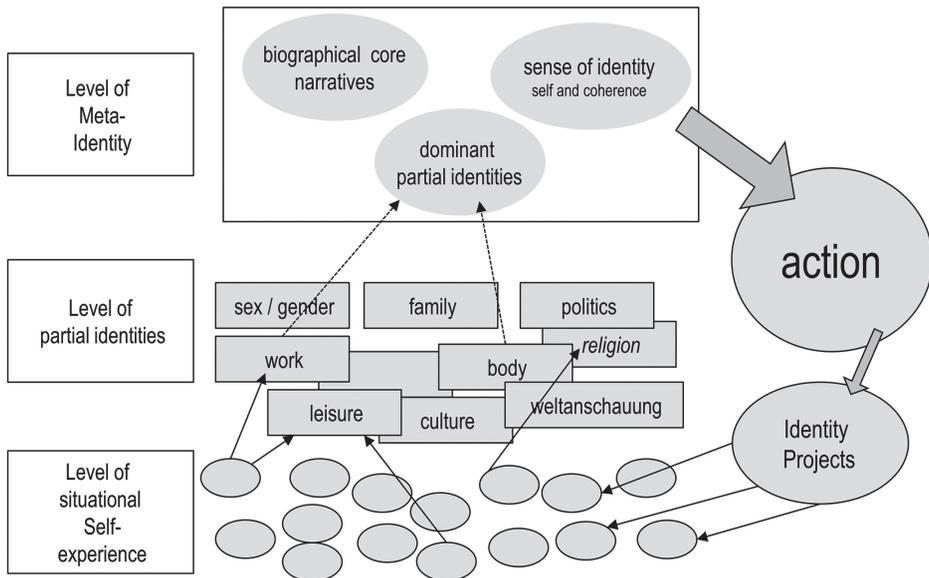


Figure 2. Procedural Identity (Keupp)

Keupp describes the whole process of “working on one’s identity” (Identitätsarbeit) as an active, ongoing, constructional process. It is inevitable for each person growing up to work through certain identity-forming issues, which might also reoccur throughout the lifetime. The continuous process of identity is situated in the intra-individual perspective. From the outside, it can only be perceived in a person’s behavior and actions, which include their narratives and other forms of expression. According to Keupp’s model, these are displayed in the person’s identity projects, which in turn derive from actions and are again being reflected in the multiple moments of everyday situational self-experiences.

### 1.2. Identity as process of formation

Keupp offers insights into the question of how the identity process can be understood intra-individually. Yet, the model does not include the forces and interests which affect this process. So it is necessary to extend the model so that it fits a broader context (Figure 3). My considerations involve various influences, resources and intentions an individual has to deal with while processing his/her own identity. The following model has emerged from close-readings of numerous psychological, sociologi-

cal, pedagogical, psychiatric and psychotherapeutic approaches to the topic of identity in the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

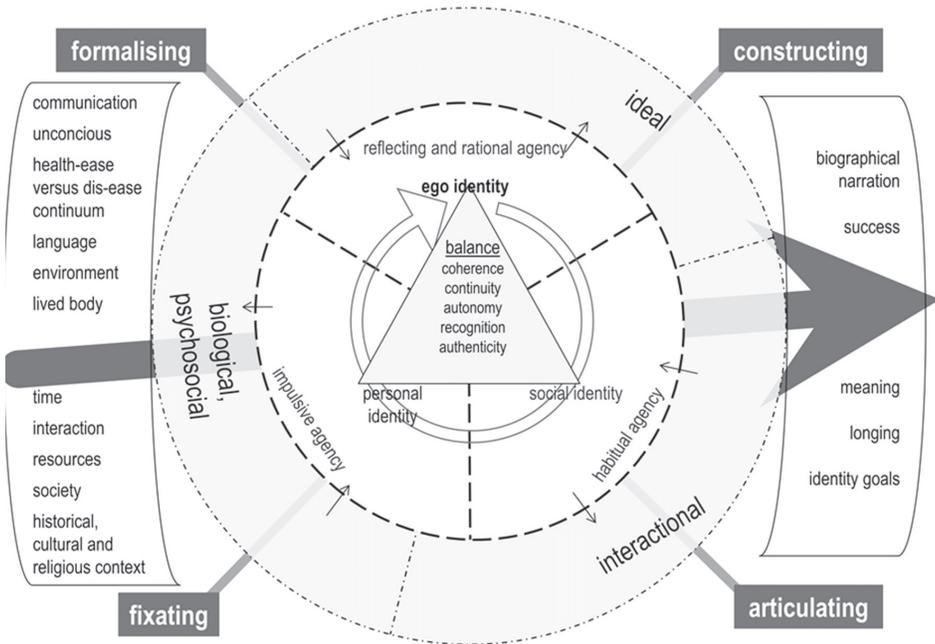


Figure 3. Identity as Process of Formation (Pirker)

The exterior level of narrativity and aestheticization as a principle expression of the identity process is located within and between the dynamical poles of fixating / constructing and formalizing / articulating. Between these coordinates, the inner process of identity is formed by influences (left column) and heads towards the direction of identity goals (right column).

The exterior circle stands for the mental horizon, within which individuals create their identity, the interior circle for the focus of their respective ability to act. Its trisection derives from the psychoanalytical model of Freud’s second topic, a topographic representation of the psychic apparatus, which consists of three agencies: *id*, *ego* and *superego*. Biological and psychosocial aspects are mainly driven by the impulsive agency. To the interactional aspects, the individual relates its habitual agency. The identity process touches the ideal dimension via the reflecting and rational agency.

<sup>10</sup> This figure is elaborated in Pirker 2013, p. 57-248.

The inner triangle shows the ongoing development of the ego-identity within this reflecting and rational agency, since this is the part an individual is able to reflect upon and talk about. The ego identity derives from and is balancing between personal and social identity. It is influenced mainly by the factors coherence, continuity, autonomy, recognition and authenticity. The inner triangle pictures Keupp's model as shown above.

This model of identity includes several centrifugal and centripetal dynamics in every single person. On one hand, every person is working on his/her ego identity, but is always also under the influence of external factors. On the other hand, a constructive and positive feedback from the exterior world is indispensable. To be alive means to struggle with and to balance between identity and difference. In today's society this process seems to be even more difficult and risky for the individual. Therefore it seems to be easier to continue using fixating and formalizing elements and not to go into the dynamics of constructing and articulating. To avoid the individual risk and effort is a possible option, but it goes hand in hand with subordinating oneself under alien constructions.

From the synopsis of various identity theories, several assumptions can be made:

- Each individual construct their own identity, for themselves and in interactional co-construction with social relations and contexts.
- Each individual construct their identity through narration and interaction.
- Identity is reflexive: The individual develops an inner sense of identity.
- The felt sense lies within the individual. Therefore, the main perspective of identity is the first-person perspective: For other persons, identity is only visible in action.
- Identity must be seen as constantly in motion: Rather than about outcomes and statuses, it is about processes.
- Individuals seek for a consistent and balanced identity, which is marked by continuity, authenticity and coherence.
- Identity is a descriptive, not a normative concept. An individual needs intentional, often normative goals (such as success, meaning, belonging) to construct its identity. Importantly, these goals are extrinsic in relation to any meaningful understanding of identity.

## **2. Is Christian identity in crisis?**

Thinking about religious identity means to place religion and religiousness in their various understandings within the scope of identity models as presented above. Since religion includes interrelating individual and collective aspects, the understanding of religion and religiousness in their relations to concepts of identity must be distinguished (– due to

constraints of space –) at least in a rough scheme and within a Christian understanding of religion.<sup>11</sup>

<b>Religious Identity</b>	
<b>individual aspects</b>	<b>collective aspects</b>
religious experience	Rituals, e.g. mass attendance
inner feeling	church commitment (sacraments)
performance	denomination
belief in God	religious practice
internal dimension of religion	external dimension of religion
<b>religion as religiousness</b>	<b>religion as institution</b>

Figure 4. Religion and Identity: between Inner Religiousness and Exterior Ties<sup>12</sup>

Religious identity is frequently referred to collective aspects such as belonging to a certain community, sharing a denomination or passing a rite of initiation. Seeing the term as such, there is always the danger of missing the first-person perspective, which has turned out to be mandatory for a psychological understanding of the identity process. ‘Religiousness’ seems to be more rooted in the individual’s identity process: it touches the central narratives and experiences as well as the sense of self. By contrast, religion as an institution belongs to the interactive surrounding individuals relate to. The first-person perspective can also be used to investigate the institutional dimension of religion and its interrelations with the inner identity process.

### 2.1. Religion within the model of procedural identity

Within the Keupp model of procedural identity (figure 2), religion can leave its marks on every level. On the level of situational self-experience, this could be for instance a grandmother praying at night; a discussion in school with a teacher of religious education; the moment of entering

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<sup>11</sup> As stated above, social sciences also use the term identity to describe group processes. This transfer of individual aspects on a collective brings along some difficulties. For a short view into this discussion see, p. 152-164. Considering collective identities, questions rise about who we are, who belongs, what keeps a group together, where lies continuity and how do we find coherence within a social dimension? Exclusivist and inclusivist strategies shape group processes around identity. In this article, the groups identities of Christianity (cf. church, communities) cannot be discussed extensively, see B. Giesen, Codes kollektiver Identität. in: W. Gephart / H. Waldenfels (eds.): *Religion und Identität. Im Horizont des Pluralismus*, Frankfurt/M., 1999, p. 13-43.

<sup>12</sup> This figure is inspired by D. Verhoeven / D. Hutsebaut, *Identity Status and Religiosity. A research among Flemish University students*, *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 8, 1 (1995), p. 46-64, here p. 50-54.

a church and making the sign of the cross; marveling at the beauty of nature or the miracle of birth; grief after a loved one passes-away: such moments can be used as an expression or a demarcation of faith.<sup>13</sup> On the level of partial identities, religion is usually understood as ideology – which implies the inner connectedness with a special conviction and form of expression. A “religious identity” can take the form of a group membership, of attending religious services, of receiving a sacrament or of sharing religious rituals with the family. As partial identity, religious identity does not necessarily have a strong impact on other parts of the identity process. On the level of meta-identity, religion might enter all three aspects: biographical core narratives (which can be religious, e.g. the decision to become a teacher of religious education, or to join a religious community), the dominant partial identities, e.g. when an individual’s gender identity stands in contrast to the religious community’s common understanding of gender roles; another example would be the case in which someone has to rely on biblical or community-related narratives in order to support their inner stability. Religion can also become an important part of the sense of identity, e.g. in the certainty of being cared for and loved by God; or in the sureness of carrying a cross within one’s own life. If religion and religiousness can be placed on this third level of meta-identity, it requires a certain visibility in both, a person’s actions and narratives, and will permeate their identity projects: Religiousness, this implies, requires a certain degree of saliency<sup>14</sup>.

## 2.2. Religion in the model of identity as process of formation

In the model of identity as process of formation proposed here (figure 3), religion, religious experiences and religious narratives can be part of different influences such as language, interaction, religious context or society. These influences converge with certain values and role models, which can be motivated by a religious context.

Within the trisection of the identity model, religion has to be located presumably within the ideal and the interactional section of identity. It is the ideal section, since religion is usually related to moral and rational agency. In many religious contexts, religion and morality are strongly intertwined. The interactional section includes all kinds of group processes or group experiences and relations. In Christianity, the personal

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<sup>13</sup> See S. Zehnder Grob / C. Morgenthaler: *Religiöse Sozialisation in Familie und Unterricht*, in: C. Käppler / C. Morgenthaler / K. Brodbeck (eds.), *Werteorientierung, Religiosität, Identität und die psychische Gesundheit Jugendlicher*, Stuttgart, 2013, p. 81-100, here p. 90 for the meaning of situational self-experiences in the broader view of religious socialization.

<sup>14</sup> Verhoeven, Hutsebaut 1995, p. 51 show that the saliency of religion in daily life even of religiously committed students is not very strong.

relation to the Trinitarian God as a significant other can be located on this interactional level. Locating religion in the bio-psychosocial section touches on current theological questions, e.g. the question of whether human beings are religious by nature, but also current theological discussions about embodiment and incarnation.

The inner process of balancing the ego identity relates to religion and religiousness, and ties in with Keupp's model. Religious narratives can influence identity goals, especially in the dimensions of theological-anthropological *Existenzialien* (i.e. factors of existence), which are elaborated below.

In both models, religion and religiousness can assume important functions in the identity process. But they are not indispensable: identity can be constructed without any religious impacts. This bears implications for religious education.

### 2.3. Religiousness and identity: an inner connection?

Is there a link between religion, identity and the "identitarian movements" in Europe? The opening question of the article has not been answered so far. Connecting the proposed issues with two empirical projects in the Psychology of Religion may provide an instructive approach. In a survey with students at the Catholic university of Leuven (n=1333) Verhoeven/Hutsebaut showed that interior and exterior aspects of religiosity correlate significantly with different identity statuses from Marcia's model. "Students with an achievement status score relatively high on the moral internal dimensions of religion, i.e. belief, saliency and religious experience, as well as religious commitment beyond mass attendance."<sup>15</sup> Students with a foreclosure status, which "facilitates the socialisation process within the family"<sup>16</sup>, tend to copy religion-related behaviour within their families. They reproduce social forms and rituals without questioning them. The achievement status includes commitment as the outcome of a 'crisis', or a process of elaboration and deliberation between alternatives. Students within the diffusion status are less religious: neither do they come to clear decisions, nor are they particularly interested.

Käppler/Morgenthaler explored relations between identity construction and religiosity among Swiss and German adolescents aged 14 to 16. They applied Keupp's model with an interest in relations to religiousness.<sup>17</sup> The operationalization does not only inquire into *how* adoles-

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> T. Christl / K. Brodbeck: Identitätsentwicklung von Jugendlichen und ihr Zusammenhang mit Religiosität. In: C. Käppler / C. Morgenthaler / K. Brodbeck (eds.), *Werteorientierung*, p. 125-148 offers the analysis of identity development of the VROID-MHAP-Study – "Values and Religious Orientations in relation to Identity Development and Mental

cents construct their identity. Rather, it asks *how successfully* they do it.<sup>18</sup> Authenticity and “ability to integrate” have turned out to be discriminating factors, which offer three different clusters of identity construction.<sup>19</sup> Authenticity is understood as an ability to be oneself in a variety of challenging social situations, while the ability to integrate implies the ability to cope with outer expectations. The three divergent groups can be described as follows<sup>20</sup>: (1) *Highly authentic and highly integrated*: These adolescents show a “healthy” balance of authenticity and adaptation. It is the smallest group in the survey (n=288): Only around 1/4 of the population are able to adapt to the challenges of identity construction in a way which seems to be successful. (2) *Highly authentic but integrated on a low level*: These adolescents are not balanced: there is a strong difference between inner world view and outer expectations (n=326). Around 1/3 of the adolescents have a high self-esteem and understanding of themselves, but are in a considerable struggle with the expectations of their surroundings. Highly religious adolescents tend to appear in this cluster, but the data is not significant. (3) *Authentic on low level and integrated on a medium level*: These adolescents are considered to be unbalanced: they lack inner confidence, and are mainly oriented towards outer expectations. It is the largest group in the survey (n=488). Nearly 1/2 of all respondents display doubt and a lack of confidence regarding themselves, but try to integrate the expectations and values of the world around them. Since the interrogated adolescents are rather young, they have not been concerned with the identity aspect referring to ‘finding their place in society’ yet. The empirical approach, however, pushes the contextualization of identity construction and religiousness a step further.

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Health – Adolescents’ Perspectives”. The level of religiousness is tested with the model from H. Streib / C. Gennerich, *Jugend und Religion. Bestandsaufnahmen, Analysen und Fallstudien zur Religiosität Jugendlicher*, Weinheim, 2015. In their mixed-methods-setting, Christl/Brodbeck use qualitative interview analyses to enrich the quantitative data. The latter offer an insight into the process of identity construction, while the interview analyses offer an insight into the ability to act – or, to be exact, into the adolescents’ arguing about their possible acting in the discursive, theoretical setting of the interview. Talking about acting is not the same as acting itself.

<sup>18</sup> This is related to Keupp’s aspects of successful identity construction: coherence, recognition, authenticity, ability to act; in this article, they entered the center of the model of procedural Identity as described in Figure 2. The operationalization translates them into several dimensions: life coherence, authenticity, acceptance, and integration achievement.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Christl, Brodbeck, 2013, p. 135-136.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 148.

### 3. Current contemporary metaphor: fluid and fragile identity

After Vatican II, theology opened up more and more to secular approaches. Notions of identity as a psychological concept have entered the theological thinking in many ways.<sup>21</sup> Theological approaches to psychological identity concepts refer mainly to the work of Erikson and Mead. Some approaches, such as Wolfhart Pannenberg's, have used and bent these concepts so that they fit their idea of God at the center of a fully functioning identity process. From a religious perspective this might seem obvious. But psychology and the adjacent discussions on identity operate from a fully secular understanding and cannot be simply used to serve theology. They have to be understood in their own terms. There might be room for a conception of God in the ideal dimension and rational agency of a person, but it does not necessarily have to be part of a full identity process. Indeed, the vivid and ongoing discussions around varying identity theories have not left many traces in theological thinking so far, with some exceptions in *Psychology of Religion and Practical Theology*.<sup>22</sup>

My research on identity from the viewpoint of pastoral psychology displays awareness of and respect towards the secular background of identity theories. Identity has to be understood as a fully immanent anthropology, although it includes the possibility to open up to the transcendental. The

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<sup>21</sup> To point out some examples from the German discourse, the following theologians related their approaches to anthropology with psychological perspectives on identity: in *Systematic Theology* T. Pröpper, *Das Faktum der Sünde und die Konstitution menschlicher Identität. Ein Beitrag zur Aneignung der kritischen Anthropologie Wolfhart Pannenburgs*, *Theologische Quartalsschrift*, 170 (1990) p. 267-298 (referring to the protestant theologian W. Pannenberg, *Was ist der Mensch? Die Anthropologie der Gegenwart im Lichte der Theologie*, Göttingen 41972); in *Fundamental Theology* J. Werbick, *Gott gehören. Theologisches zur Identitätsproblematik*, *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie*, 97 (1975) p. 441-462; in *Religious Pedagogics* N. Mette, *Identität in universaler Solidarität. Zur Grundlegung einer religionspädagogischen Handlungstheorie*, *Jahrbuch der Religionspädagogik*, 6 (1989) p. 27-58; R. Englert, *Glaubensgeschichte und Bildungsprozeß. Versuch einer religionspädagogischen Kairologie*, München, 1985; H.-G. Ziebertz, *Im Mittelpunkt der Mensch? Subjektorientierung der Religionspädagogik*, *Religionspädagogische Beiträge*, 45 (2000) p. 27-42; G. Büttner / V.-J. Dieterich, *Entwicklungspsychologie in der Religionspädagogik*, Göttingen, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> A few started to read deeply into the work of Heiner Keupp, recently Jochen Sautermeister, *Identität und christlicher Glaube Option für lebensbejahende Humanität und selbstbejahende Authentizität*. In: M. Felder / J. Schwaratzki / L. Karrer (eds.), *Glaubwürdigkeit der Kirche. Würde der Glaubenden; für Leo Karrer*, Freiburg/Br. u.a., 2012, p. 292-305, C. Käppler / C. Morgenthaler / K. Brodbeck, eds.: *Wertorientierung, Religiosität, Identität und die psychische Gesundheit Jugendlicher*. Stuttgart, 2013. M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*. Nashville, 1996 has to be named as a theological approach to Christian identity from the viewpoint of postmodern French philosophy which converges with procedural identity theories.

integration of multifaceted identity theories collates metaphorically in the expression “*fluid and fragile identity*”.<sup>23</sup>

*Fluid* implies that there is a permanent process which goes on in the “subjective stream of consciousness”<sup>24</sup>. It also implies an extroverted dimension as it originates from the word “fluidum”, which means gaseous, auratic. Narrations and aestheticizations of the identity process can be understood as a fluent and meandering process, wherein identity turns outwards in a fluid movement. This idea derives from two main arguments in the identity debate. From the viewpoint of social psychology there is Keupp’s notion of a procedural and continuously changing patchwork identity as described above.<sup>25</sup> From the perspective of sociology Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of “liquid modernity” is highly relevant.<sup>26</sup> It emphasizes the need to include the factors of proceduralism, development and time flowing in every description of individuals, society and their relations.

*Fragile* implies that although individuals seem to be stable and consistent, their experience of themselves is as vulnerable beings not only regarding their boundaries, but also the deeper layers of their soul. Henning Luther’s idea of “identity in fragment”<sup>27</sup>, from the perspective of pastoral theology, is central here. With this, he positioned himself against the notion of possibility to finalize the processes of formation. As an aesthetic concept, the notion of fragment implies that there is always something missing, that there can never be completeness within life and within the identity process. Theologically, Luther sees that identity goals of individuals need to rely on ideas and concepts which lie out of reach. Thus, the immanent scope is widened and the option of transcendence included a liberating intervention in a steadily ongoing process of identity. Fragility is close to ‘fragment’, but it implies the possibility of congruent and positive individual narratives. I follow Paul Ricoeur’s concept of “fragility”<sup>28</sup>, derived from his understanding of narrative identity. The metaphor “fragile” goes hand in hand with the theological debate surrounding “vulnerability”.

The process of identity formation can be seen as fluid and fragile at the same time. Through the identity process, individuals raise their inner coherence and continuity onto their own visible surface, while at the same

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<sup>23</sup> The following perspectives are fully explicated in Pirker, 2013, p. 362-367.

<sup>24</sup> W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, New York, 1890.

<sup>25</sup> Keupp et al 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Hoboken, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> H. Luther, Identität und Fragment. Praktisch-theologische Überlegungen zur Unabschließbarkeit von Bildungsprozessen, in: *Religion und Alltag. Bausteine zu einer praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*, Stuttgart, 1992, p. 160-182.

<sup>28</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Respect de l’Autre et identité culturelle. Identité fragile. publiée dans: Les droits de la personne en question 2000.*

time, outer interactions and movements flow inside. In this process, the interior and exterior are inextricably intertwined. It would be wrong to understand this process as a simple movement of action and reaction. Rather, it causes mutual dependency and interpenetration for both, individuals and their environment. In the following sections, some theological notions to the question of identity will be added. It is a theology in fragment: These notions provide a number of starting points for further approaches in systematic theology.

The terms “fluid and fragile” can be adapted to a religious argument in the tradition of post-Vatican Theology, i.e. liberal theological thought, which is based on the ‘anthropological turn’.<sup>29</sup> Secular theories as characterized above are theories in their own right and of their own generativity. Theology must accept their particularity with all implications. Theology might ask for limitations and may warn of any implicit anthropology which is against humanity. Several dimensions of theological-anthropological *Existenzialien* as proposed by Karl Rahner can be related to the identity model: All individuals strive for meaning, freedom, love and hope. They long to succeed in the process of balancing different identity aspects and to fill these with special meaning. They seek autonomy and recognition at the same time, with their freedom being situated somewhere in between. Individuals need positive interactions; they need love for themselves and for the other. They need hope for a positive future. To be able to believe in this, they need minimum confidence. The fifth dimension is failure – it threatens the other *Existenzialien*. The possibility of failure brings to mind the *theologia crucis*. The cross is the strongest symbol within Christianity. It shows that there is always a tentativeness, which can only be conquered by confidence and hope. Importantly, this also converges with a dominant idea of a secular identity theory: “Without any trace of hope that confidence into the recognition of expectations is not threatened; without an opportunity to take responsibility for one’s action; without the experience that special needs can become a part of a just and satisfying agreement, any attempt of keeping up identity would be absurd and self-destructive.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. K. Rahner, Grundentwurf einer theologischen Anthropologie, in: F. X. Arnold / K. Rahner / V. Schnurr / L. Weber (eds.), *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie. Praktische Theologie der Kirche in ihrer Gegenwart*, Freiburg/Br. u.a., 1966, p. 20-38.

<sup>30</sup> L. Krappmann, Identität, in: D. Lenzen (ed.): *Pädagogische Grundbegriffe*. Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1989, p. 715-719, here p. 718, original: “Ohne die Spur einer Hoffnung, daß Vertrauen auf die Anerkennung von Erwartungen nicht enttäuscht wird, ohne die Gelegenheit, für Handeln Verantwortung zu übernehmen, ohne die Erfahrung, daß mitgeteilte Eigenheiten in eine gerechte, befriedigende Übereinkunft eingehen können, wäre der Versuch, Identität aufrechtzuerhalten, sinnlos und selbstzerstörerisch.”

## Conclusion

In a time which has turned identity into a fluid and fragile process, it is not easy to raise a good story and a proper picture of one's self. Considering narrativity and aestheticization as key factors for finding and telling your own identity in today's society includes the fact, that failure, illness, lack of beauty, lack of succeeding, or secret dark moments in one's past seem to be stories-better-untold in a world that asks for a strong individual. So, it seems to be easier to hide such things and get strength from the outside. Current individual and social movements show the desire to hold on exterior stabilities. If the individual loses its inner anchor, it is a challenge to find a role model and to establish a new stability inside. One will start to look around where to attach their own identity projects. Being committed to a larger movement, being part of a strong group forms influential aspects on the identity process: the outer anchor replaces the inner. Success is transferred to the others, while the individual can take their part within this successful story. If people define their identity around strong commitments without questioning them, they are not forced to act individually. But strong outer identities are not necessarily steady for a long time. They may grant a part-time identification. They might change and they might lose their adhesive.

Identity is an anti-essentialist concept. Rather, it shows a continuous process of formation and opens up possibilities to get in touch with the individual within their own concepts. The 'identitarian' political movements do not have a lot in common with Christian values, even though they scream for the 'Christian Occident'. Constructing a religious, Christian identity today can only be seen within the difficult and demanding, fluid and fragile process of narrativity and aestheticizations. Religion in its social dimension seems to offer stability, but getting onto the interior level of religiousness, it includes severe challenges for the individual. Religion is *crisis* – the meaning of the word of Greek origin is – decision. The strongest Christian value is perhaps a spiritual understanding of individuality. It is the Trinitarian God's own call to a single person; it is the Trinitarian God becoming human with and within each person. Are these key concepts visible within current religious education? One should put a strong emphasis to honor and to strengthen the first-person perspective on religiousness, also within a rational argumentation. In order to develop the individual's commitment in an achievement status and in order to augment authenticity, religious education should put religion as a crisis.