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

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a striking finding of our research into the religious identity commitments and process of religious identity development of emerging adults who grew up in strictly Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. We observed a recurrent theme in the life story accounts we studied. Almost all the participants expressed that they feel or felt not good enough for God or believers within strictly Reformed contexts. In this article, we explore this theme and show how feelings of not being good enough are related to various aspects of participants' strictly Reformed upbringing, such as specific beliefs and specific ideal images. In addition, we show which experiences go along with feelings of not being good enough. Last, we discuss the findings, provide suggestions for future research and point to directions for further reflections by educators.

Introduction

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

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schools, churches and other organisations. These institutions, together with families, contribute to the religious socialisation of youth from an early age. As such, religion might be highly influential in the youth's development into adulthood.

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

We observed, however, that attention has also focused on other, more negatively perceived influences stemming from religion or religious background. These influences, such as feelings of guilt, shame, fear and depression, are addressed in the academic, mainly psychological and quantitative literature; in public discussions,[1] blog posts and websites with personal stories of people who have left the faith. Generally, these are valued as negative. Several academic studies indicate that there is a link between the more negative or non-supportive influences of religion and religious domination or degree of religiousness (Bucher 2017; Dollahite, Marks, and Dalton 2018; Eurelings-Bontekoe, Hekman-van Steeg, and Verschuur 2005; Künkler, Faix, and Jäckel 2020; Park and Slatterly 2013; Schaap-Jonker 2018). This means that the more orthodox people are and the higher their degree of religiousness, the more they report negative feelings. The theology of these highly or strictly religious denominations seems to be the crux, and especially certain beliefs and God concepts (Künkler, Faix, and Jäckel 2020; Schaap-Jonker 2018). Examples of influential beliefs and God concepts are the belief in human sinfulness; the perception of God as angry, judging and punishing; and the belief that God decides whether people go to heaven or hell (Schaap-Jonker et al. 2017).

Current study

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

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

Research design

We employed a qualitative research methodology because it allowed us to gain the in-depth and detailed insights we sought about religious identity development (Creswell 2013; Patton 2002). Furthermore, qualitative exploratory research suited our population, since strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults have received hardly any attention in the research literature (Creswell 2013). An essential part of our methodology was a narrative approach involving the study of life story accounts. This was because we assumed that 'identity emerges out of a person's reflective consideration of her or his life story' (Schwartz, Luyckx, and Crocetti 2015, 544). Thus, while narrating, the process of participants' religious identity development would come to the forefront.[2]

We developed semi-structured interview guidelines with open-ended and key questions. The open-ended questions were aimed at inviting participants to share their life stories, and the key questions addressed the central topics of our research. We included visual tools in our interview instrument. In the first interview about current religious identity commitments, the interview started with a discussion of eight photos selected by participants as a reflection of who they are. At the start of the second interview about the process of religious identity development, each participant drew a timeline of his or her life. While narrating, they added to the timeline things that were significant in this process. These visual methods help reduce the power relationship between interviewer and participant, and they stimulate storytelling, especially for those who would consider it difficult to speak about such a sensitive topic as personal religiosity (Kolar et al. 2015; Mustafa 2014). In this regard, Dunlop and Richter (2010) observe that 'visual methods open opportunities for creative lines of conversation with young people. Images operate on a subconscious, intuitive level, which means they are often able to transcend religious language and lead to fruitful discourse about spirituality and belief' (210). Likewise, the study of Kolar et al. (2015) on the use of timelines in life story interviews showed that

> timelines help to focus a participant's attention on the interview by acting as both a memory aid and a visual guide or map for how the interview will progress, as well as to situate responses within personal and structural contexts while highlighting important events in an individual's life story (14).

Participants and procedure

All participants were former students of strictly Reformed secondary schools in the Netherlands and were selected after they completed an online survey they received from their secondary school. Characteristic of these schools is that they only permit

students with parents who commit themselves to the strictly Reformed policy of the school. In the online survey, emerging adults interested in participation were able to identify themselves in terms like 'strictly Reformed' or 'not strictly Reformed' and 'Christian' or 'not Christian'. Considering age, educational level and gender, we selected 18 participants who fell into three profiles: Christian and strictly Reformed, Christian but not strictly Reformed or don't know, and non-Christian or non-religious. The participants were aged 22 to 25,[3] because this life stage of emerging adulthood is important for identity development (Arnett 2015). Also, we assumed that the participants would be able to reflect on their life histories, their religious identity development and their strict religious upbringing (Arnett 2015; Grysman and Hudson 2010).

The interviews lasted approximately three hours each and were conducted between April 2018 and April 2019. The participants were interviewed twice, and they were rewarded with 50 euros for their participation in the research project. The interviews took place, when possible, in their own homes to avoid distractions and to allow them to feel most comfortable. The first author, who conducted the interviews, audiotaped each interview and kept notes that were the basis for a report written afterwards. The verbatim transcriptions of approximately 110 hours of interview material were the source for our data analysis.

Analysis

Our initial analysis focused on investigating the main topics of our research: commitment, exploration and the influence of contextual factors. For this purpose, the first author carried out thematic analysis with ATLAS.ti conforming to Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis. Through thematic analysis, we were able to find unexpected 'common thematic elements across participants and the events and experiences they report' (Patterson, Markey, and Somers 2012, 137). In line with the principles of this thematic method, the open-coding phase of our analysis showed that besides the codes concerning the main research topics, other codes were prominent in our data. After completing the analysis for these topics, we decided to dive into the most prominent of those additional codes[4] that emerged in almost all interviews.[5]

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

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

Trustworthiness

We increased the trustworthiness of this study in various ways. First, the first author kept a logbook containing choices and reflections on the research process, the content of the interviews and the researchers' position in the project. Also, the transcripts were transcribed verbatim, and we used the computer program ATLAS.ti for analysis, which recorded all our analysis steps. We thereby aimed at transparency in our research process (Nowell et al. 2017). Second, to reach inter-coder consensus, the codes, analyses, reflections and interpretations were discussed among the co-authors and other researchers who provided feedback (Cornish, Gillespie, and Zittoun 2014; Nowell et al. 2017). Last, we selected a sample with as much variation as possible. In this way, both researchers and practitioners can determine whether our findings apply to other settings and populations (Korstjens and Moser 2018).

Results

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

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

All participants except one referred in at least one of the two interviews to past or present feelings of not being good enough. We found that they felt not good enough for God, parents and people within the strictly Reformed community, such as teachers and fellow church members. Based on our data analysis, we argue that this theme implies that participants experienced that they fell and continue to fall short. Jonathan said: 'You hear the Ten Commandments every day or every Sunday, at least we do. And, um, yes, He [God] asks that of us and we do not stick to it. Well, let me keep it personal. At least, I don't'.

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

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

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

hand with feelings of guilt from failing to do what they believe God requires in religious practices and what is good or necessary.

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

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

> There is always a kind of voice in the back of your mind that makes you think, you know, yet that is [. . .] Well yes, imagine that if you are not converted, you will go to hell, and if you continue life on this path or whatever that could have far-reaching consequences. [. . .] It is confusing. It, eh, it's frustrating at times that those thoughts are still there while you're really trying to let it go.

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

Ideal images

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beliefs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion and conclusions

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

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

We found that in participants' life story accounts, feelings of not being good enough were more frequently associated with God than with the religious environment. Thus, the not-being-good-enough theme underlines the tridirectional relationship in religious identity development we suggested in our systematic literature review study (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. 2019). This tridirectionality implies that not only the person and the context are involved, but that a transcending factor, like God, is perceived to be involved as well. We propose that the contribution of transcendence to not-good-enough experiences is mediated by the presented ideal images and beliefs. These are transmitted mainly by educators in families, churches and schools. Thus, we recommend that educators

involved in religious socialisation reflect not only on the contents they transmit and the expectations they have but also on how these might shape young people's sense of self. This reflection is important, since the line between feelings of not being good enough for God and believers within strictly Reformed contexts on the one hand, and a negative religious self-perception on the other hand, might be a thin one (Park 2016). Our finding that several participants internalised the idea of not being good enough, against their will, as a voice in the back of their head might point in that direction. Under the influence of personal characteristics, high standards set in society and social expectations displayed on social media, a negative religious self-perception presumably might result in overall low self-esteem. Also, we recommend that educators consider how they could help young people deal with ambivalent feelings of not being good enough.

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

In comparison to other studies into orthodox religious populations, we propose that this vacuum is typical for our strictly Reformed population. This is because studies into Evangelical or Pentecostal adult Christians (Eurelings-Bontekoe, Hekman-van Steeg, and Verschuur 2005; Strhan 2019), Latter-day Saint adolescents (Sanders et al. 2015) and Roman Catholics (Walinga, Corveleyn, and van Saane 2005) seem to indicate that these groups hold different beliefs, including God concepts, and have different experiences. There is, for example, more emphasis on the loving and supporting character of God and the possibility of a personal relationship with God, which shape a person's sense of self positively. God is perceived as one who loves people. For the non-strictly-Reformed populations, there appears to be a way out when people feel not good enough: through rituals and confession, as in the Roman Catholic tradition (Walinga, Corveleyn, and van Saane 2005), or through Jesus's death as a release, redemption and atonement for sinners (Strhan 2019). Strhan (2019) compares, in this regard, Calvinists – a label that also applies to the strictly Reformeds – and conservative evangelicals. She maintains that 'unlike Calvinist theology, there is [for conservative Evangelicals] a doctrine of assurance, and church members – if they doubt their salvation – are taught to "return to the cross" to feel assured of God's forgiveness' (163). The study contributes to the existing literature on feelings of falling short within Christian populations by elaborating on this theme from the unique perspective of a population of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands.

The second reason is that feelings of not being good enough might prevent youth from exploration and exercising agency, which is considered crucial for religious identity development (Barrow, Dollahite, and Marks 2020; Hemming and Madge 2012). They may feel not good enough when exploring alternative beliefs and practices, and when they make choices in their religious identity development that are different from what they are expected to choose (Assor et al. 2005). The study of Barrow, Dollahite, and Marks (2020) revealed that parents honoured the agency of children by respecting and accepting their religious views and choices.

This finding aligns with our finding from an earlier study on contextual influences in religious identity development (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. 2020). We found that our population of strictly Reformed-raised emerging adults considered it important that they, in this process, are accepted as they are and not judged because of their beliefs and practices. We, however, propose that the feelings of not being good enough presented in this study are the opposite of feelings of being accepted and respected. Thus, we recommend that educators and practitioners both within strictly religious contexts and beyond reflect on the kind of (religious socialisation) climate they create: an acceptance and affirmation environment or an atmosphere of condemnation and judgement.

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

Also, we acknowledge that the findings are limited by the context our participants grew up in, as it is rather specific, considering the strict Reformed theology and the conforming beliefs and practices. Thus, it would be interesting to investigate the relationship between negative religious self-perceptions and religious beliefs and socialisation practices within other religions or Christian dominations. Also, it would be relevant for future researchers to explore how, in religious identity development, specific socialisation practices and resulting feelings of not being good enough (or similar feelings) interact with personal characteristics (cf. Greenway, Milne, and Clarke 2003; Künkler, Faix, and Jäckel 2020) and participants' relationships with their parents (cf. Dickie et al. 2006), as well as feelings of not being good enough stemming from social-cultural expectations in society. Likewise, it is recommended that future researchers explore in more detail how feelings of not being good enough, with underlying beliefs and ideal images, shape youth' in their religious identity development. Finally, future work should focus on how feelings of not being good enough can be overcome or dealt with so that 'negative experiences can help to develop a more mature faith and a more mature personality' (Künkler, Faix, and Jäckel 2020, 12).

Notes

1. In social media posts, magazine pieces or newspaper columns, etc.
2. Our narrative approach involved us studying the content of the life story narratives to 'find common thematic elements across participants and the events and experiences they report' (Patterson, Markey, and Sommers 2012, 137). We thus chose not to 'keep a story "intact" by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases' (Riessman 2008, 53).
3. At the time of the interviews, all participants were 23–25 years old.
4. Considering the number of quotations.
5. 'Experience strictly Reformed upbringing: not good enough'. Shortened code name in ATLAS.ti: 'exp str Ref upbr: not good enough.'

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