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Choosing a Religion as an Aspect of Religious Identity Formation in Modern Societies¹

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1. Introduction

Embedded in the stories and rituals of every religious faith are general templates for living, maps that allow people to locate who they are, who they are not, and how they can best express their distinct identities. (Pargament 1997, 53)

The meaning of religion for people's expression and formation of identity is well-known. Traditional religions have served this function for thousands of years and new religious movements (NRMs) which have been on the rise in the West since the nineteenth century² are doing so in a similar way. Accordingly, Eileen Barker asserts that NRMs "*address and offer answers to some of the ultimate questions* that have traditionally been addressed by mainstream religions (...) such as: Who am I?" (Barker 1998, 16; original emphasis) – a question which is inextricably interwoven with the question of identity.

One aspect of religion or religiosity which can be regarded as specific to individuals in modern western societies is the process of choosing a religion. Below we will reflect on the question of how the choice of a religion can be understood as an aspect of religious identity formation. We will begin by introducing the general concept of "identity" or "religious identity" and considering the impact of the cultural background on (religious) identity. After depicting a constructivist model of religiosity which can be helpful for the understanding of identity formation we will then present data from our own research on self-chosen membership in NRMs to support the notion that

1 This chapter is a reworked version of the first author's paper presented at the International Conference on "Religious Harmony: Problems, Practice and Education", Yogyakarta/Semarang September 27th – October 3rd, 2004. The results presented are based on a project conducted by both authors, supported by the German Volkswagen-Foundation, 2002–2007.

2 We do not understand NRMs as being fundamentally different from "old" religions but as being characterised by a special dynamic in regard to their minority status and their developmental state.

choosing a religion is an aspect of religious identity formation. With this material we want to show how cultural and psychological factors shape religious identity and how they interact.

2. The Concept of “Religious Identity”

Coming originally from philosophy, in recent decades, the term *identity* has found its way into a variety of other disciplines as well as everyday language. Today it is mainly used in psychology and the social sciences. It is closely connected to the concept of self. Despite the difficulties in finding an overall definition, some characteristics are generally accepted: On the level of the individual person the idea of identity centres on the subjective answer to the question “Who am I?”.

The ongoing effort to find an answer to this question is the identity formation process. The individual’s being and development have to be integrated with socio-cultural conditions and expectations. The successful balance between personal identity as expressed in the very individual biography, and social identity, manifesting itself for example in the affiliation to several social groups, can be understood as ego or ego identity (e.g., Habermas 1975). If this balance cannot be achieved, identity crisis or even identity diffusion may occur.

Religious identity can be understood as the answer to the question “Who am I?” – extended to the sphere of transcendence. Thus, the religious self needs to find answers to questions like “Why am I here on earth?”, “What is my purpose in life?”, “How do I relate to God (transcendence)?”, “How shall I behave in life?”, “What is right and wrong?”, “How shall I relate to other people, to the environment?” and so on. Having valid answers to these questions constitutes a stable religious identity which is usually conveyed by belief in religious teachings and/or affiliation to a religious community. As we will explain below, religious identity is shaped by at least two interacting dimensions: the cultural and the individual dimension.

Of course (religious) identities – not being stable entities – can sometimes be threatened. Often the response to a threat is some sort of defense like tightening one’s boundaries, devaluing others to maintain one’s own sense of superiority etc. Though we cannot go further into this topic, the defenses of individual or collective identity can be the source of conflicts between people and/or religions and are therefore important to consider.

3. The Impact of the Cultural Background on (Religious) Identity

To illustrate how the cultural background shapes an individual's religious identity and his/her understanding of the world and the self we would like to distinguish – knowing that this is an oversimplification – two types of culturally transmitted world views:

- 1) Religion as an all-encompassing cultural system that maps the typical situation in traditional or closed societies.
- 2) Religion as a sub-system of society that reflects modern systems of society.

3.1 Religion as an All-encompassing Cultural System

As Figure 1 shows, in traditional or closed societies religion encompasses all other spheres of society (see Geertz 1973). Religion is not just one cultural sub-system among others but the basis and framework of everything else. It is a primary, non-reducible phenomenon. Such an epistemological perspective can be found in Islamic countries as well as with some western Christian countries. An individual who is part of such a culture is quite naturally also part of the cultural religious identity. So here the question is not: "What does the religious identity look like?" but "How strong is its impact?"

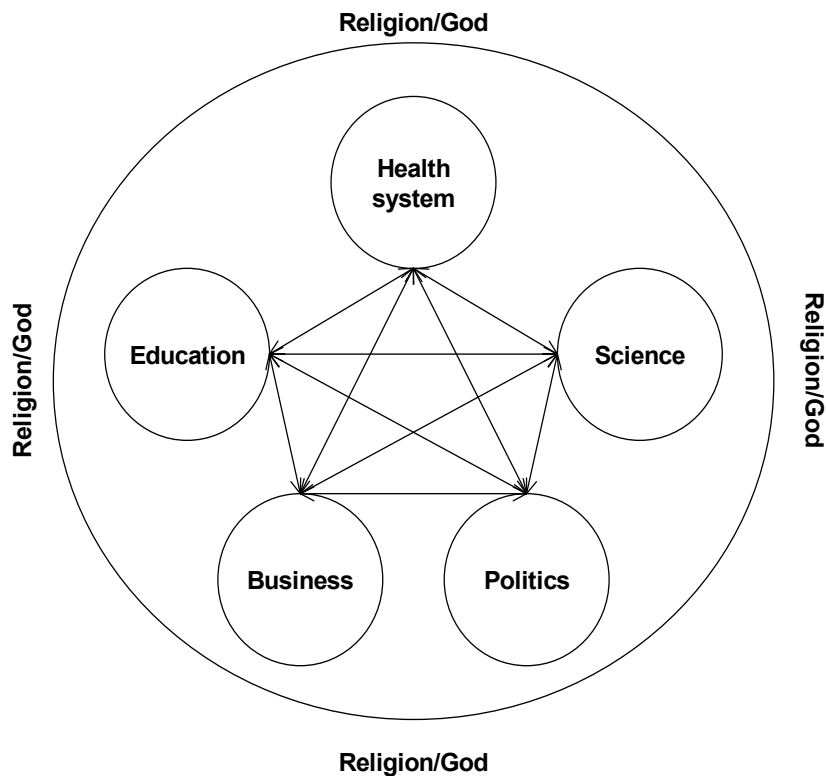


Figure 1: Religion as an all-encompassing cultural system

3.2 Religion as a Sub-system of Society

In modern societies the role of religion has changed considerably. Modern sociology understands society as the result of interacting sub-systems, all of which have their own structure and inner logic (e.g., Luhmann 1995). Some of the major sub-systems can be seen in Figure 2: the economic sphere, science, education and religion being *individual subsystems* among others in society. Religion has no privileged position here.

This has several consequences:

- 1) Religion (singular) as one culturally homogeneous communal world view changes to religious pluralism, to religions (plural). More than one religion is part of the culture.
- 2) The individual has the choice as to which religion he or she chooses or if he or she considers religion to be important at all.

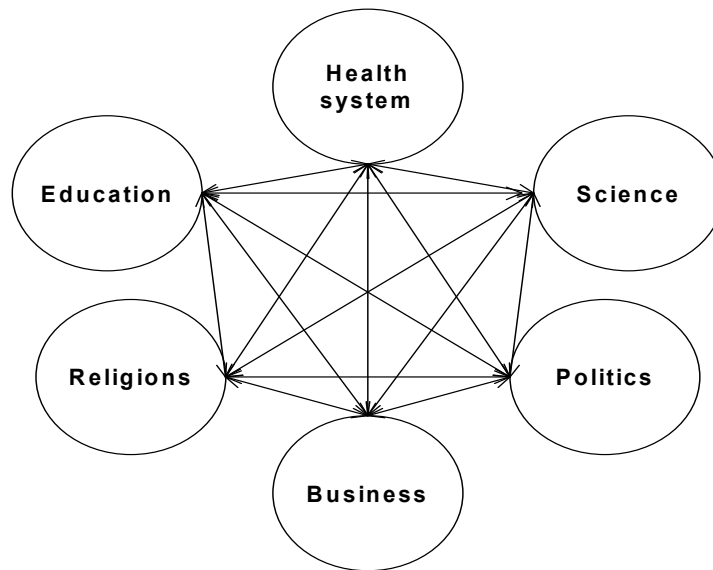


Figure 2: Religion as a sub-system of society

As a result of this social set-up, (religious) identity is culturally determined to a lesser degree in pluralistic western societies, and the individual dimension becomes much more important than in the first model (Figure 1).

3.3 The Situation in Indonesia

Having learned so much from the Indonesian colleagues in the course of the conference it became obvious that neither of these two models applies to the Indonesian situation. Adopting the model to fit the Indonesian cultural context, the Indonesian situation can be understood as a combination of the cases presented above (see Figure 3). According to *pancasila* the belief in one unifying absolute (*ketuhanan yang maha esa*) is a cultural element encompassing all Indonesian people (cf. Franke 2005 and Steenbrink 1990). It is unthinkable that a person would not believe in *ketuhan*, in *agama* (religion). This applies not only to psychological identity but also to one's "official" identity (and registration as an Indonesian citizen). On the Indonesian identity card the field *agama* has to be filled in. A person without *agama* will not receive an identity card. Within these communally shared assumptions we now find a variety of religions that are "accepted" and others that are not accepted. As the debate at the conference showed, the interaction between the different religions is not always well defined and it is a political question as to which religions are considered acceptable.

Each of these religions has an impact on its members' identity formation including guidelines for other spheres of life like nutrition, education, politics or behavioural patterns with regard to health.

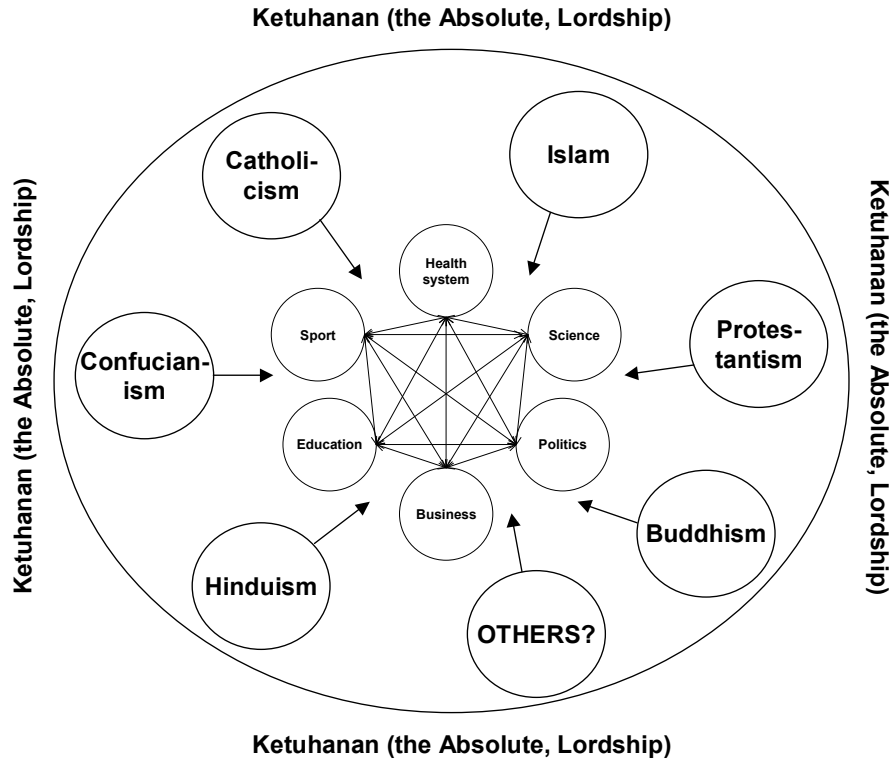


Figure 3: Religion in Indonesia

The Indonesian situation encompasses both the option to choose to a certain degree among the “accepted” religions and the general cultural concept or framework of *ketuhanan*, which is not to question. The option to step outside the concept of *ketuhanan* is not an option in Indonesian culture.

4. Individual (Religious) Identity Formation in Modern Societies

Today, in a modern society characterised by individuality, pluralism and globalisation, the formation of identity becomes the task of the individual. He/she has to find his/her own lifestyle, peer group and even world view. Having so many choices creates both a new freedom as well as uncertainty and confusion. With identity formation becoming the task of the individual, some theorists even question the notion of one (undivided) identity and rather speak of multiple identities³ or patchwork-identities (Keupp et al. 1999)

³ For a short overview see Deaux 2000, especially 223–224.

which have to be constructed and reconstructed throughout an individual's life. Psychologically speaking, the fragmentation of society is mirrored in the individual's division into several identities or roles. However, the individual still has to maintain a minimum of continuity and coherence to remain mentally healthy and able to function. Often no satisfactory answer to the question "Who am I?" is found, i.e., a stable identity cannot be developed, resulting in an increase of mental disorders like depression or anxiety attacks.

These general conditions in modern western societies are also reflected in the sphere of religion and world views. For centuries Christianity was the dominant world view in the west, the source for individual and collective identity. Today religion is no longer an all-encompassing framework but one sub-system of society which in itself is diverse and promotes a rapid increase in the number of religious and ideological movements. A homogeneous religious socialisation and identity is no longer a matter of course. It is rather the task of the individual, with his/her needs for meaning and belonging, to develop a religious or non-religious identity by choosing from what the old and new world-views have to offer.

Thus NRMs as well as traditional religions can be understood as cultural supplies which offer personal and social identities via different forms of world- and self-interpretation – offers which can be especially relevant or attractive in times of (identity) crises (see, e.g., Pargament 1997, especially 386ff.; Ullman 1989). By turning to a religion or a new religious movement, even if only temporarily, the individual can obtain a new understanding of him/herself, a structured system of social relationships, and a sense of continuity and coherence.

To come to a better understanding of the individual religious identity formation process and the significance the religious identity can have for personality in general, we will introduce a constructivist model of religiosity in the following section. It demonstrates how the religious identity is only one among other identities, and which implications arise from its position in the self.

5. A Constructivist View of Religious Identity

Following George Kelly's psychology of personal constructs (Kelly 1955), Stefan Huber, in his attempt to provide a multidimensional measurement model, defines religiosity as a personal construct system (Huber 2003; also Huber 2004). According to Kelly's theory, a personal construct is a cognition or mental assumption which a person uses to categorise the world. A personal construct system is a hierarchical system of personal constructs characteristic of an individual person, which is designed to minimise incompatibilities and inconsistencies in the way events are grouped together. Human experience and behaviour is determined by such individual personal constructs and

construct systems. The extent to which a construct influences a person's experience and behaviour depends on its hierarchical position in the individual's construct system. Personal identity is thus defined by the way the individual construes or understands his/her personal world. So changes in constructs go along with changes in identity.

On the basis of these assumptions Huber postulates that the impact of the religious construct system on experience and behaviour is dependent on its centrality (i.e., hierarchical position) in an individual's personality. If the religious construct system – which we regard as one of a person's identities – has a central position in a person's personality, his or her behaviour and experiences are to a great extent influenced by it (see Figure 4). (This is similar to the way in which religion as an all-encompassing cultural system influences the diverse spheres of society.)

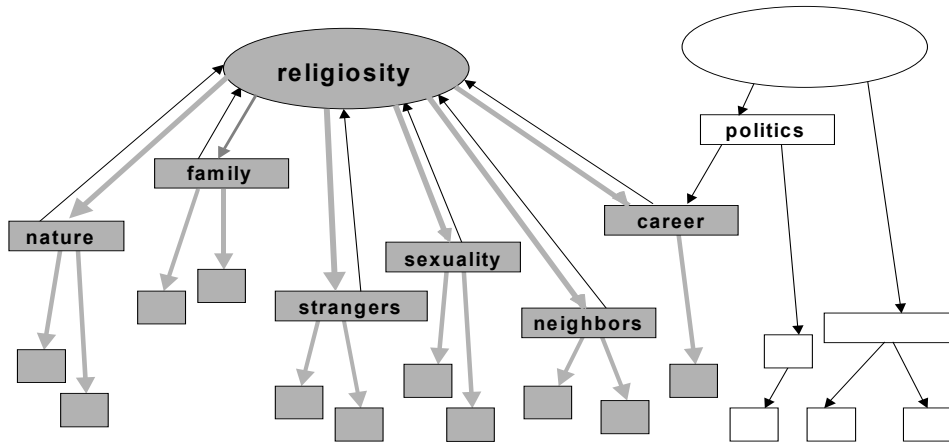


Figure 4: Central Position of the Religious Construct System (Source: Huber 2004)

If it has a subordinate position, its influence is only peripheral (see Figure 5). Thus, centrality determines the importance religiosity has for a person's everyday life. If its importance is high, it is very likely that other life spheres like family, work, and other identities are also influenced by it.

With the help of Huber's Centrality of Religiosity Scale (cf. Huber 2003), respondents can be divided into three groups: one group with the religious construct system in a central position; a second group with the religious construct system in a subordinate position; and a third group with a marginal position where hardly any (theistic) religious construct system exists.

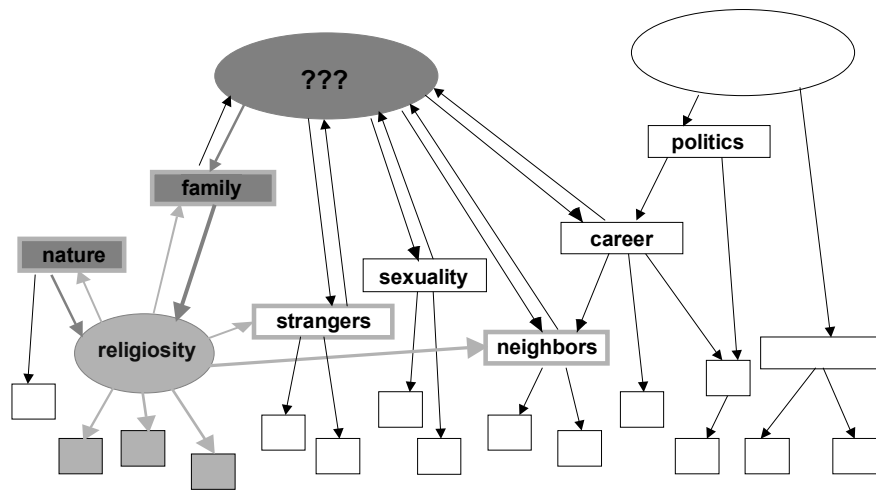


Figure 5: Subordinate Position of the Religious Construct System (Source: Huber 2004)

Since the centrality of religiosity gives us primarily information about the strength of the impact of the religious construct system but not about its direction, Huber suggests measuring religious contents separately to understand the direction of the impact. It depends on the specific contents of the belief system and patterns of interpretation which result from it, e.g., God image, belief about after-life, etc. In regard to the question “Who am I?”, different religious contents like “You are a sinner” or “You are a *bodhisattva*” of course do shape the (religious) identity and its implications in different ways.

Religious identity can therefore be conceptualised as a function of centrality of the contents of an individual’s personal religious construct system. The more central religious beliefs become in the process of identity formation, the more all-encompassing their influence on a person’s identity and life as a whole will be.

6. Identity Formation Through Choosing a Religion

Among the many ways in which religious identities can be shaped in modern society, the choice of a new religion in adulthood is a particularly significant one. In the following section we will explain how self-chosen membership in religious groups (in this case new religious movements) can be understood as an act of (religious) identity formation.

6.1 Theoretical Considerations

From what has been said above, it can be deduced that the attractiveness of NRMs in modern societies has several reasons. They represent values and guidelines for life clearly and without any ambiguity in view of the societal vacuum. This provides stability and orientation. They also provide social integration in a time of general social disintegration and offer solutions to the problems of life. Additionally the possibility of exclusive participation enables the individual to realise the two dimensions of identity which always have to be balanced: namely exclusiveness (personal identity) and belonging (social identity) (Wippermann 1998, 180).

Turning to a NRM or a new faith in general in times of crisis or insecurity can substantially change the person's self-understanding. Apart from gradual identity changes and identity enlargements, a radical change of identity may occur in some cases of conversion⁴ (or deconversion). William James, in his famous book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, emphasised the role of religious conversion in identity formation. He defines conversion as "the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities" (James 1982, 189).

The process of identity change in the case of a religious conversion is complex and encompasses several elements. At the cognitive level new knowledge is acquired; at the behavioural level a restructuring of daily activities can be observed, combined with a re-evaluation of past conduct. A change in relationships can be observed in the social dimension. Both quality and intensity of relationships change. The affective level is probably most important. A change in identity is often accompanied with intense, mostly positive feelings like joy, peace or certainty. After a religious conversion, often the whole biography and former identity of the individual is re-interpreted in light of the new faith system (see, e.g., Staples and Mauss 1987). In terms of the constructivist model of religiosity, one can say that the highly central position of the religious belief system and the clear religious contents which result from the conversion have a powerful impact on the person's life.

While a religious closed system of reference as is usually conveyed by NRMs, can be highly stabilising for one's identity, it can also create religious conflicts, dissonance and disappointments or threats through other world

4 For a comprehensive account of the transformational power of (Christian) conversion see Gillespie 1991. See also Paloutzian et al. 1999, who conclude that conversion "can result in profound, life transforming changes in mid-level functions such as goals, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, and in the more self-defining personality functions such as identity and life meaning" (pp. 1047–1048).

views and beliefs which can be perceived as challenging one's identity (e.g., the idea of eternal sin). This helps us understand why the sense of identity of apostates from exclusive religious groups is often shaken and needs to be reworked (see, e.g., Wright 1991).

6.2 Empirical Findings

Data from our own current research on self-chosen membership in NRMs⁵ supports the assumption that choosing a religion can be understood as part of the identity formation process.

Our research group examined 71 new members to three so-called new religious movements or "cults". The three groups are small Christian minority groups in Germany: Jehovah's Witnesses, the New Apostolic Church and a local Pentecostal Church. In our attempt to understand motives and consequences of the religious choice, we found interesting results also with regard to identity formation, some of which will be briefly presented below.

As situational factors which typically precede identity formation processes, we found that:

- Most of our subjects were around 40 years old. This highlights the importance of the mid-life period for the (religious) identity formation process. Furthermore, the fact that the subjects' age ranged from 18–66 years shows that religious identity formation is not restricted to a certain life period ($M = 41.16$ years; $SD = 12.40$ years).
- Many of our subjects reported indicators of identity insecurity before joining, such as problems with partners, general unhappiness or religious quest.

With regard to the formation of the religious identity we observed that:

- The religious groups – and therefore the contents of the belief system – differed (we assume that the choice depends on a person's specific needs).
- The importance of subjects' religious centrality increased. Before joining the group only 16.9% scored high on centrality⁶, after joining, 87.3%.

As Huber postulates, religiosity should have a great influence on a person's life if it has a central position in the personal construct system. Indeed, there are indications that identity – along with an increase in religious centrality – changes in the process of joining a religious group. This identity change is seemingly not restricted to religious identity in a narrow sense. It encompasses several levels:

5 For further results see Murken and Namini 2004a and 2004b.

6 Measured with Huber's Centrality of Religiosity Scale (see above).

- People on average reported an increase in life satisfaction, happiness and life orientation after joining the NRM, which indicates a change on the affective level.
- On the behavioural level, the amount of time people spent on their new religious engagement per week indicates a restructuring of daily activities (New Apostolic Church: $M = 7.0$ h; local Pentecostal Church: $M = 13.6$ h; Jehovah's Witnesses: $M = 18.2$ h).
- People reported a loss of or considerable reduction of contact with former acquaintances as well as new friendships through the new religious group (social dimension).

The data thus confirm our assumption that choosing a religion can be understood as an aspect of identity formation. The new religious identity affects not only religious life, but in many cases also influences other aspects of people's identity and their life as a whole.

7. Conclusion

In western societies the formation of identity is a difficult, ongoing and highly individual process. Questions of identity arise at different stages in life, but, as our results show, an important stage of life in which many people question their values and former life and which therefore can also be considered as a time of identity formation and orientation is mid-life (cf. the notion of a mid-life crisis). C. G. Jung's famous observation that "among all of my patients in the second half of life, that is to say over thirty-five, there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life" (Jung 1933, 264) vividly illustrates the importance of religious questions and of a stable religious identity in this stage of life.

Due to a variety of life styles, roles, options and world interpretations, the individual has to constantly choose which options fit him or her best. This is also true for the religious sphere. Though many people still remain in their parents' religion, it is nevertheless an option for the individual to select a religion (or none) and to decide to which extent this religion shall influence his/her life.

Choosing and adapting to a new religion can be a powerful method of identity formation. Since a religion offers answers to many facets of the question "Who am I?", many aspects of the self such as feelings, thoughts, behaviour and relational patterns are at least temporarily changed and often stabilised simultaneously.

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