A cultural take on the links between religiosity, identity, and meaning in life in religious emerging adults

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A cultural take on the links between religiosity, identity, and meaning in life in religious emerging adults

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Identity and meaning in life are core developmental assets in emerging adulthood. We analysed how religiosity is related to these intentional strivings in emerging adults enrolled in theological education, by depicting (1) identity strivings and meaning in life accounts in faith narratives (Study 1) and (2) links between personal identity and meaning in life profiles and religious beliefs, behaviours, and subjective experiences (Study 2). Both studies highlighted that a Foreclosed status, with high personal commitment and reduced exploration, was dominant in faith narratives and personal identity profiles. Also, in narratives meaning in life was reflected by a strong focus on presence of meaning through religious insights. Nonetheless, global meaning in life profiles indicated that many emerging adults were searching for a meaning in their lives, while reporting lower levels of presence of meaning. Identity Achievement and High Presence–High Search profiles were linked to the highest levels of subjective, behavioural, and cognitive religiosity. We highlighted the multidimensionality of identity and meaning in life strivings in emerging adults attending theological schools. We pointed out that even in a somewhat foreclosed cultural context (e.g., Romanian Christian Orthodox theological schools), religion represents a dynamic social and ideological context for self-development.

Statement of contribution

What is already known on this subject?
- Religious beliefs increase in emerging adults, doubled by decreases in religious behaviours, linked to an adherence to a more personal approach to religion.
- Religious youth are more committed to their faith and also explore identity and life meaning in relation to their religious strivings.
- Youth religious exemplars report close links between their religious faith and strivings for meaningful life goals.

What does this study add?
- We investigated Christian Orthodox theology students, for whom religion is a normative dimension of personal and vocational development.

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- A Foreclosed status, with high personal commitment and reduced exploration was dominant in faith narratives and in personal identity profiles.
- Many emerging adults were searching for a meaning in their lives, while at the same time reporting lower levels of presence of meaning.
- Identity Achievement and High Presence–High Search profiles were linked to higher levels of subjective, behavioural, and cognitive religiosity.

Emerging adulthood is viewed as a distinct developmental period, marking an extended transition to adulthood especially in youth aged 18–29 enrolled in university (Arnett, 2007). It is a period of extensive exploration, often including a reconsideration of religion's role in one's personal development through a transgression from a culturally shared communal religiosity to a more personally defined spirituality (Smith & Snell, 2009). Existing studies highlighted an increase of religious beliefs in emerging adults, doubled by a decrease in religious behaviours, often linked to an adherence to a more personal approach to religion (e.g., Barry & Nelson, 2008; Lefkowitz, 2005). This makes many US emerging adults envision themselves as 'a congregation of one' (Arnett & Jensen, 2002), marking a schism from traditional religions. In this context, Cook, Kimball, Boyatzis, and Leonard (2015) urged researchers to have a closer look at highly religious emerging adults in growingly secular societies. This endeavour is very important in shedding more light on how active adherence to a certain religion influences self-development in emerging adulthood.

Identity and life meaning are two salient concerns during emerging adulthood (Erikson, 1950; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). The question 'Who am I?' is central to self-development in this time frame, as it embodies an exploration of and search for possible life paths and outlets that can offer learning experiences (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). One such outlet is religion, which opens a relation of the individual with the sacred and the transcendent and offers a direction for personal strivings and also for finding life meaning (Fowler, 1995). Existing research highlighted that highly religious US youth seem to be more committed to their faith and also to the exploration of their identity and life meaning in relation to their religious strivings (e.g., Kimball, Cook, Boyatzis, & Leonard, 2013). Additionally, qualitative research on diverse youth religious exemplars pointed out a close relation between religion and purpose/meaning in life: Young people reported close links between their religious faith and their strivings for meaningful life goals (e.g., Carr, King, & Meier, 2014; King, Clardy, & Ramos, 2014). Still, more studies are needed to depict these relations in specific cultural contexts, especially where religion is a normative dimension of personal and social development (e.g., Romania; Mustea, Negru, & Opre, 2010; Negru, Haragâş, & Mustea, 2014; Negru & Mustea, 2009).

Religion in the Romanian cultural context

After the 1989 revolution that overthrew the communist regime, the church as institution returned to the Romanian social scene, marking its presence in schools, as religious education was introduced in primary schools (Ică & Marani, 2002). According to the National Institute of Statistics of Romania (2012), 85.94% of the country's population is Christian Orthodox. Moreover, at national level, the church is the most trusted institution (Müller, 2011) and church attendance in the general population is very high compared to other European countries (Pickel, 2009). These social perceptions may lead to the promotion of cultural goals that value and support careers related to religion (Phinney &

Baldelomar, 2011), as in Romania parents have to declare the religion of their offspring at birth and rates of religious reconversion are very low (Negru *et al.*, 2014). In this context, theological seminaries and theological faculties can be viewed by parents and youth as a means of accessing education and developing a career within this strong social institution (i.e., the church). This reciprocity in the relation between cultural context (i.e., the church is viewed as a trustworthy institution) and personal development (i.e., educational and career goals, existential beliefs) may favour in the Romanian context premature choices of theology life paths. As the Romanian culture encourages conformity to tradition, exploration of such life paths may be very limited before young people choose to attend theological education and it may be limited to exploration within the family or the close community (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011).

The Orthodox Church has the status of national church and is often invoked as a fundamental institution of the Romanian society (Ică & Marani, 2002). Most theological schools belong to this confession and currently there are 39 Christian Orthodox Seminaries and 15 Faculties of Orthodox Theology (Romanian Orthodox Church, 2015). These vocational schools have a strong confessional focus. For instance, for theological school admission, an Orthodox baptismal certificate and official consent from the local church are required. Hence, theological education in Romania creates developmental contexts for religious development through religious doctrines (e.g., Bible study and dogmatics) and practices (e.g., regular attendance of religious services). As theology students start the Orthodox Seminary at age 14, their personal and vocational development is intertwined with their religiosity.

Choice of enrolment in vocational theological seminars and then in theological faculties can be linked to the positive perception of the church in the Romanian general population (Negru *et al.*, 2014) and also to the positive perception of occupations related to the church. In particular in smaller communities, the priest is a highly regarded member of the community and this occupation offers stable employment (i.e., priests can be employed in a parish for life). Additionally, enrolment in tertiary education has increased in Romania in the past decades, due to the very limited access to this type of education during the communist regime and also to the positive social perception of university studies (Karaś, Cieciuch, Negru, & Crocetti, 2015). These social factors led many families to guide and then financially support their offspring through university, although employment of university graduates has sharply decreased in the past decade (Karaś *et al.*, 2015; Negru, 2012). In this larger context, employment in church settings can be viewed as a safe haven, in that it is a very stable path to a lifelong, socially valued position. In this sense, girls who choose to enter theological schools can opt for teaching religion in schools after graduation, as part of their missionary work. In Romania, the teaching of religion in educational settings is strictly linked to religious denominations (e.g., only a Christian Orthodox can teach Christian Orthodox religion classes). In order to have the possibility to teach religion, candidates must have graduated denominational theological studies and must have the official approval of the church (Biserica Ortodoxă Română, 2016).

Linking religiosity to identity and meaning in life in emerging adulthood

Identity development consists of exploration (i.e., questioning of and search for different life goals) and commitment (i.e., choice of specific life goals). Four possible identity statuses were initially derived from these dimensions (Marcia, 1966): *identity achievement* (i.e., the person has made a firm commitment, as a result of extensive exploration);

foreclosure (i.e., the person has made a firm commitment, without prior exploration); *moratorium* (i.e., the person is currently exploring alternatives, without any strong commitments); and *diffusion* (i.e., the person is neither exploring options, nor assuming strong commitments). Recent models of identity formation (Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, Klimstra, & Meeus, 2012; Crocetti *et al.*, 2015; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006; Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006) unpacked identity exploration and commitment into multiple identity processes. Luyckx and colleagues' model, for example, includes five separate but interrelated processes of identity development (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx *et al.*, 2008). The authors described two types of commitment to life goals: *commitment making* (i.e., adherence to specific beliefs and principles) and *identification with commitment* (i.e., assimilation of present commitments in one's sense of self). Also, they detailed three types of exploration pursuits: *exploration in breadth* (i.e., the manner in which adolescents actively explore diverse paths for future development); *exploration in depth* (i.e., thorough appraisal of present commitments); and *ruminative exploration* (i.e., worry and indecisiveness regarding present choices). Based on this model, identity statuses (achievement, foreclosure, moratorium, carefree diffusion, troubled diffusion) are derived, revealing how identity processes are organized *within* individuals (e.g., Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Beyers, & Missotten, 2011; Schwartz *et al.*, 2011). An Achievement profile was linked with optimal personal and social adjustment, while Troubled Diffusion was associated with increased negative functioning (Luyckx *et al.*, 2011; Meeus, 2011; Schwartz *et al.*, 2011). These studies also indicated that a Foreclosed identity profile was related to both positive and negative outcomes, and can be viewed as a double-edged sword. On the bright side, the high levels of commitment provide clear goals for the future. On the dark side, Foreclosed individuals have lower identification with these commitments, probably due to the lower levels of exploration, which can make these goals rather rigid (Luyckx *et al.*, 2011). Hence, Foreclosed people can have difficulties in adjusting their identity commitments to a rapidly changing context and have lower levels of autonomy than achieved individuals (Archer & Waterman, 1990; Luyckx, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Duriez, 2009).

A coherent comprehension of one's life, the world, and how one fits within this world represents another important pursuit in emerging adulthood. Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006) distinguished two dimensions of meaning in life: *presence of meaning* (i.e., a person's perception of her/his existence as being purposeful, significant, and valuable) and *search for meaning* (i.e., a person's efforts aimed at exploring and increasing the significance of his/her life). Dezutter *et al.* (2014) analysed meaning in life profiles in emerging adults, bringing forward five main profiles, labelled: High Presence–High Search, Low Presence–High Search, High Presence–Low Search, Low Presence–Low Search, and an Undifferentiated profile. High Presence–Low Search, followed by High Presence–High Search, has been linked to positive psychological outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, eudaimonic well-being), while Low Presence–Low Search was linked with negative psychological functioning (e.g., anxiety, social aggression).

Identity and meaning in life are closely linked constructs (Erikson, 1968), in that a coherent worldview supports identity exploration and identity commitments. In this respect, a recent longitudinal study has pointed out that a strong sense of meaning supports identity commitments, while the process of seeking life meaning sustains identity exploration across time (Negru-Subtirica, Pop, Luyckx, Dezutter, & Steger, 2016). However, the two constructs also differ, in that meaning in life integrates generic existential preoccupations (Frankl, 1963), while identity strivings reference processes of exploration and commitment to certain personal goals (Crocetti *et al.*, 2012; Erikson,

1968; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006). Consequently, an emerging adult's search for meaning in life offers a positive context for the identification and then selection of core personal goals. In this respect, both identity and meaning in life can provide a basis for youth religious development (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014).

Religion provides a social, ideological, and transcendent context for self-development (King, 2003, 2008) and religious youth tend to make strong identity commitments in different domains (e.g., ethnicity, Markstrom, 1999), which then foster prosocial orientations, thriving, and positive youth development (e.g., Cook, Leonard, Kimball, & Boyatzis, 2014; Furrow, King, & White, 2004; King, Carr, & Boitor, 2011). As religious and spiritual growth operates in multiple *social contexts* (e.g., school, family, congregation), different agents of religious socialization (e.g., parents, priests) and different symbol systems (e.g., fasting) assist youth in selecting identity pursuits. These transactions also represent an *ideological context*, by exposing them to beliefs, worldviews, and values, so that they can acquire a sense of meaning in their lives. Additionally, religion opens a window for understanding oneself in relation to the transcendent, providing a *transcendent context* for self-development. Personal religiosity encompasses 'the subjective feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that arise from the search for the sacred' (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003, p. 382). Hence, we viewed religiosity through three components: what the person thinks about the sacred or about divinity (i.e., beliefs/cognitions), what the person does to search for and/or experience the sacred (i.e., behaviours), and how the person subjectively experiences a connection with the sacred or divinity (i.e., subjective experiences/emotions). Religion is an intrinsic part of theology students' education, career, and daily social functioning. In this respect, as previous studies also highlighted (e.g., Kimball *et al.*, 2013), their personal identity is linked to the manner in which they express their religiosity. Additionally, their world views, in terms of pursuit and affirmation of meaning in one's life, are also linked to their religiosity. Apparently, for this specific sample of emerging adults, religion is explicitly a central cultural context of development and it is important to understand how their religiosity is linked to their personal identity and meaning in life.

Therefore, in order to have an in-depth perspective on the complex relations between these constructs in theology students, we used a two-study, qualitative, and then quantitative approach. The first study focused on an in-depth, qualitative analysis of identity pursuits and meaning in life through religious faith. The second study was designed to investigate how global identity and meaning in life profiles are linked to religious beliefs, behaviours, and subjective experiences. Hence, the first study looks at identity and meaning in life as inherent segments of one's religious faith, while the second study investigates the relation between religiosity and intra-individual identity and meaning in life profiles, viewed as separate constructs.

STUDY I

In order to capture the peculiarities of religiosity in emerging adults who are enrolled in theology studies, we tapped into their narratives of faith and religion, which can offer an in-depth account of how religion is linked to their identity and meaning in life in this life stage. Personal narratives focus on the subjective depiction of core events that a person sees as important for who he/she is or has become (McAdams & McLean, 2013). A narrative life story approach (McAdams, 2001) draws on the subjective construction of identity by means of the process of telling life stories, which are viewed as dynamic enactments of one's identities. They give new meaning to life circumstances and

provide people with a sense of coherence regarding their existence. For emerging adults enrolled in theology studies, their religiosity and faith are personal and professional assets, being the result of a series of educational and confessional choices in early adolescence (i.e., attendance of a theological seminary). Therefore, faith-relevant events may be grounded in religion as life choice and in the religious teachings they were exposed to during schooling, as religion represents a social, ideological, and transcendent context for self-development. For emerging adults attending theology studies, religion has been present, from early on in their lives, in most daily interactions and is imbued in all life decisions. Hence, we expected participants to focus their faith narratives on strong identity commitments through religion and also on presence of meaning in life through religion.

Method

Participants

A total of 69 emerging adults (54% females) participated in the study. Participants were enrolled in four Christian Orthodox theological vocational schools (two theological seminars and two theological faculties) in the north-western part of Romania. Mean age was 19.82 years ($SD_{age} = 4.37$, age range 18–29). Participants were recruited in their schools and also during church-organized cultural events; they could choose to complete the narratives by means of pen and paper in their classrooms or at home and then return them to the research assistants. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous; participants did not receive any form of reward for their involvement in the study.

Measures and procedure

We tapped into self-defining memories regarding one's religiosity and religious faith with an adapted version of the Self-Defining Memory Questionnaire (Singer & Blagov, 2000; Singer & Moffitt, 1991–1992). Self-defining memories are viewed as highly emotional stories, which the person considers important from his/her perspective and which he/she often thinks about (Thorne & McLean, 2002). Memory prompts were formulated in terms of events when participants became strongly aware of their religiosity and religious faith (see Mansfield, Pasupathi, & McLean, 2015). Participants wrote their narratives by means of paper and pencil, in Romanian. Table 1 details the narrative prompts that participants received.

Data analysis

In line with existing methodologies in narrative identity (e.g., Syed & Azmitia, 2008), we first randomly selected ten narratives, which were analysed with an adapted version of the Listening Guide method (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). This method uses varied interpretative communities to stimulate the generation of multifaceted outlooks on the same narrative. The interpretative community consisted of three people (the first and second author of the study, and an independent researcher), who discussed the selected narratives during several meetings. They independently coded each narrative on themes pertaining to two categories: development of personal identity through religion and life meaning-making through religion. These free-generated themes were then discussed, to gain consensus on their level of specificity. As a result, the first author elaborated a

Table 1. Study 1 narrative procedure and sample items for study 2 instruments

Instrument	Description/sample item
Study 1	
Religious narrative prompts (Mansfield *et al.*, 2015; Singer & Blagov, 2000; Singer & Moffitt, 1991–1992)	Try to think about something that happened in the last years that is important for your faith in God and for the manner in which you see your religious faith. This event has to be important for you, from your point of view. Please write down, with as many details as possible, exactly what happened in that occasion. When you write in detail about this event, please write as many details as possible about: what happened in that occasion; when did the event take place; who was involved; what you did in that situation; what was on your mind then; how you felt then; why this event is meaningful for you; what this event says about yourself and your faith in God
Study 2	
Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness and Spirituality (Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging, 1999)	*Subjective/emotional* dimension of religiosity (six items): 'I find strength and comfort in my religion'. *Behavioural* dimension of religiosity (nine items): *Organizational religiosity* (two items, e.g., 'I attend religious services'.) *Religious commitment* (two items, e.g., 'I take part in the activities of my religious community other than attending services'.) *Private religious practices* (five items, e.g., 'I pray privately in places other than at church'.) *Cognitive* dimension of religiosity (seven items): *Values/beliefs* (two items, e.g., 'I believe in a God who watches over me'.) *Beliefs about forgiveness* (three items, e.g., 'I know that God forgives me'.) *Religious meaning* (two items, e.g., 'The events in my life unfold according to a divine or greater plan'.)
Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006; Luyckx *et al.*, 2008)	*Commitment making*: 'I have decided on the direction I want to follow in my life' *Identification with commitment*: 'I sense that the direction I want to take in my life will really suit me' *Exploration in breadth*: 'I regularly think over a number of different plans for the future' *Exploration in depth*: 'I regularly talk with other people about the plans for the future I have made for myself' *Ruminative exploration*: 'It is hard for me to stop thinking about the direction I want to follow in my life'
Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger *et al.*, 2006)	*Presence of meaning*: 'I understand my life's meaning' *Search for meaning*: 'I am always looking to find my life's purpose'

preliminary coding manual, which was discussed in the interpretative community and then tested on four additional narratives. The coding manual was further adapted and finalized. Two trained coders then used the coding manual to code the narratives. Intercoder disagreements were resolved by discussion of specific problematic aspects, until an agreement was met.

Results

Each narrative was coded on two categories: development of personal identity through religion and life meaning-making through religion. The coding was grounded solely on the teller's explanation of the experience. In this respect, each category was coded according to the coding manual, thus allowing in each category for the possibility of multiple themes integrated in the same narrative (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Also, coders rated for each category the main theme of the narrative. In case none of the themes was depicted in a narrative, it was coded as 'other'. Two participants provided narratives that could not be coded and hence were eliminated from the analyses. Table 2 details each theme and coding guidelines.

Personal identity through religiosity

This category referred to the manner in which participants linked their religiosity to who they are and how they develop as a person. Two themes emerged (Cohen's κ = .88): (1) *stable personal commitment* (74.6%; i.e., critical life events reconfirm a pre-existing, strong personal commitment through religious pursuits) and (2) *active self-exploration* (25.4%; i.e., the person tries to find out more about who he/she is by reflecting on his/her religiosity). The former theme focused on strong affirmation of one's religiosity through religious behaviours, beliefs, and subjective experiences, which the person viewed as central for his/her personal identity through religion. Critical events that emerging adults detailed (e.g., loss of loved ones, illness, accidents) were interpreted as 'God is with me and still helps me get over all that happens to me by giving me strength' (Jane, 18 years) and that 'God works also through people and especially through His followers' (John, 24 years). This theme resembled the identity status of foreclosure, in that participants were very committed to a divinity and defined themselves through religious teachings, but they were involved in few exploratory endeavours to explore their stance towards divinity further. The latter theme focused on one's examination of personal goals and life paths through religiosity, in terms of gaining new knowledge on oneself and one's goals for the future. As one participant recollects,

> I discovered another type of faith, […], much more vibrant, more dynamic, through close involvement in the community, […] this belief is much more practical, it opens another perspective for me, because in the end "faith without facts is dead." (Michael, 20 years)

Narratives detailed new perspectives on personal goals and plans for the future that included one's religiosity, but were open constructions, in that religiosity helped participants reimagine and gain new perspectives on their future.

Life meaning-making through religion

This category encompassed the manner in which participants projected meaning into their lives through their religiosity. Two main themes emerged (Cohen's κ = .83): (1) *insight through religion* (73.8%; i.e., a transformational experience that revealed presence of meaning in one's life) and (2) *reflection on life through religion* (26.2%; i.e., processing and search of meaning in one's life by extracting religious life lessons from personal experiences). The former included personal revelations of one's meaning in life through religiosity as 'this event made me realize that everything done with God is a good thing and has another emotional tone to it' (Maria, 25 years). A sense of meaning in one's life was revealed through a critical experience (e.g., death, illness) and this revelation was usually reiterated in a life statement, 'since that day I realized that God exists, and that

Table 2. Categories and themes in study 1 (N = 67)

Category	Theme	Narrative example
1. Personal identity through religiosity	1.1. Stable personal commitment (74.6%) A stable personal commitment appears when the event/context the person describes reconfirms or strengthens a pre-existing faith. The event is not linked to changes or explorations of oneself through faith (e.g., the person details how an event reconfirmed his/her strong devotion to God). Religious behaviours (what the person does), beliefs (what the person thinks), and subjective experiences (what the person feels) are linked to a confirmation of an already existing bond of self with God	'[...] Then I felt the most God's presence in my life and I realized how important it is to pray to God and to uphold the faith you received through the Baptism'. (Tabitha, age 18)
	1.2. Active self-exploration (25.4%) In describing the event the person tries to find out more about himself/herself through faith (e.g., he/she questions the validity of current choices and tries to explore different life paths or strategies to approach difficult decisions)	'After a year passed without going to confession, I felt a state of despair, grief, sadness. [...] Then I went to confession and when I started to tell my sins, the priest told me about God's love and with no reason I started to cry, me, the one who hadn't cried for years'. (Adrian, 19 years)
2. Life meaning-making through religiosity	2.1. Insight (73.8%) In the event/context, the person describes he/she has a revelation and disentangles a meaning or a significance in one's life through faith, beyond the mere event. A central type of transformation is detailed (e.g., emotional, relational)	'I felt God very close when I went to confession... I felt an inexplicable strength that gave me a state of inexplicable happiness... I realized for real the real presence of the Divine Gift in my life'. (Jeremiah, age 18)
	2.2. Reflection (26.2%) The person searches for a significance of his/her life by explorating his/her faith. The person seeks new contexts and learns new life lessons and new things about himself/herself, but he/she does not have a global sense of meaning in life through faith	'When I felt God close was this summer, when I went to the Oasa Monastery... I felt surrounded by goodness... I meditated upon God's presence... I meditated upon my soul, upon every moment when God is with me'. (Mathilda, age 18)

without Him nothing good can be done' (Diana, 18 years). The latter theme focused on subjective, cognitive, and behavioural processing of life events thorough the lenses of religion, for an in-depth analysis of one's life purpose:

> it is the beginning of an intense search to find God, to receive Him more often in my life through my going to mess more often, I also tried to fast more often during the year and to confess through prayer any spiritual need I have.(Peter, 29 years)

Summing up, for the category personal identity through religiosity many participants (74.6%) viewed their religiosity as a stable personal commitment, while others were more involved in active self-exploration regarding their religiosity (25.4%). In terms of meaning-making through religion, a large percentage of participants gained insight through their religion (73.8%), while fewer employed reflection on life through religion (26.2%).

STUDY 2

To date, most research on identity and meaning in life in religious emerging adults has employed a variable-centred approach, focusing on relations among variables through correlational associations and modelling (Schnabel, Asendorpf, & Ostendorf, 2002). These approaches cannot depict the complex manner in which multiple variables are configured *within* persons. In order to approach this shortcoming, we used a person-centred approach, depicting naturally occurring identity and meaning in life profiles. Next, we were interested in understanding how different dimensions of their religiosity are linked to their identity and, respectively, meaning in life profiles, through an in-depth depiction of the relation between subjective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions of religiosity and intra-individual identity and meaning in life profiles.

We expected participants to be overrepresented in the identity Foreclosure and Achievement statuses, and also in the High Presence–High Search and High Presence–Low Search life meaning cluster, because their educational, vocational, and personal life paths are so clearly focused on their religiosity. Also, as we conceptualized religiosity as a positive outcome, we expected these profiles to be linked to the highest levels of subjective, behavioural, and cognitive religiosity. We expected Troubled Diffusion and Low Presence–Low Search profiles and to be associated with the lowest levels of religious subjective experiences, behaviours, and beliefs.

Method

Participants
A total of 326 emerging adults (65.3% males) participated in the study. Participants were enrolled in four Christian Orthodox theological vocational schools (three theological seminars and one theological faculty) in the north-western part of Romania. Mean age was 20.62 years (SD_{age} = 2.62, age range 18–29). Participants were recruited in their schools and they filled in the questionnaire by means of pen and paper in their classrooms, after classes. In terms of family structure, 80.2% came from two-parent families, 14.9% reported that their parents had divorced, and 4.9% reported other family situation (e.g., foster care). As for living arrangements, 45.4% were living with their parents, 30.7% were living with other students or friends, and 9.5% were living alone. Most of our participants were fully financially supported by their parents or by other primary caretakers (70.9%), while 23.1%

had an additional source of income that supplemented the financial support provided by their families. A small percentage of participants (11%) had a job. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous; participants did not receive any type of reward for their involvement in the study. Participants gave their informed consent for participating in the study and could choose not to fill in the questionnaires.

Measures
The scales were translated from English to Romanian through the back-translation method (Brislin, 1970) by four academics. Inconsistencies among these translations were analysed until a consensus was met for a final Romanian form of each measure. Then, two bilingual translators back translated the Romanian versions to English.

For all measures, we computed averaged scores. In Table 1, we detail and provide items examples for each scale.

Religiosity
We employed adapted scales from the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness and Spirituality (BMMRS, Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging, 1999), tapping into *subjective/emotional*, *behavioural*, and *cognitive* dimensions of religiosity. All items were drawn from the NIA/Fetzer Short Form employed in the General Social Survey (Appendix A, Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging, 1999). Items were selected in order to depict these three dimensions of religiosity in a relevant manner for the Romanian religious context. We tapped into the *subjective/emotional* dimension of religiosity through daily subjective spiritual experiences (six items from the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale, Cronbach's α = .87; Underwood & Teresi, 2002). We analysed *religious behaviours* by means of religious practices (nine items, Cronbach's α = .82) that reflected organizational religiosity (two items), religious commitment (two items), and private religious practices (five items). We investigated *cognitive constructions of religiosity* (seven items, Cronbach's α = .80) through values/beliefs (two items), beliefs about forgiveness (three items), and religious meaning (two items). Items were coded so that participants responded on a scale from 1 (reflecting the lowest level in the investigated construct) to 5 (reflecting the highest level in the investigated construct).

Identity
Identity processes were measured with the Romanian version of the Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS, Luyckx *et al.*, 2008; Negru-Subtirica *et al.*, 2016 for the Romanian version). The DIDS assesses identity processes regarding future plans and possible life paths. It consists of 25 items, divided equally into five subscales which appraise specific identity processes, namely commitment making (Cronbach's α = .88), identification with commitment (Cronbach's α = .85), exploration in breadth (Cronbach's α = .81), exploration in depth (Cronbach's α = .78), and ruminative exploration (Cronbach's α = .85). Participants responded on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Meaning in life
Meaning in life was measured with the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ, Steger *et al.*, 2006). The MLQ comprises of presence of meaning (five items, Cronbach's α = .76) and

search for meaning (five items, Cronbach's α = .85). Participants responded on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Results

Identity and meaning in life profiles

We conducted the cluster analyses on identity processes and, respectively, on meaning in life dimensions in SPSS 20.0 (IBM Corp., 2011). We standardized scores within the total sample and these standardized scores served as input variables for the analyses. For the cluster analysis, we employed a two-step procedure. First, we conducted hierarchical cluster analyses using Ward's method and squared Euclidean distances (Steinley & Brusco, 2007) on the Z-scores for the five identity dimensions and, respectively, for the two meaning in life dimensions. Second, initial cluster centres of the best retained class solution were used as non-random starting points in an iterative k-means clustering, which generated the final classification. Figures 1 and 2 present the final cluster solutions for identity processes and meaning in life dimensions, respectively. Cluster solutions were retained for both constructs according to theoretical predictions, parsimony of the cluster solution, and explanatory power (Dezutter *et al.*, 2014; Luyckx *et al.*, 2008; Zimmermann, Lannegrand-Willems, Safont-Mottay, & Cannard, 2015). The distance between the cluster means and the total sample standardized mean, expressed in standard deviation, may be interpreted as an effect size (Scholte, Lieshout, Wit, & Aken, 2005). In line with Cohen's (1988) conventional criteria, 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8 standard deviations may be viewed as small, moderate, and large effects, respectively.

For identity processes, the five-cluster solution proved to be the most appropriate. This cluster solution explained (adjusted R^2) 66% of the variance in commitment making, 56% of the variance in identification with commitment, 60% of the variance in exploration in breadth, 51% of the variance of exploration in depth, and 62% of the variance in ruminative exploration. In line with our hypotheses, the five identity clusters that emerged were as follows: Foreclosure (27.9% of participants; medium–high levels in
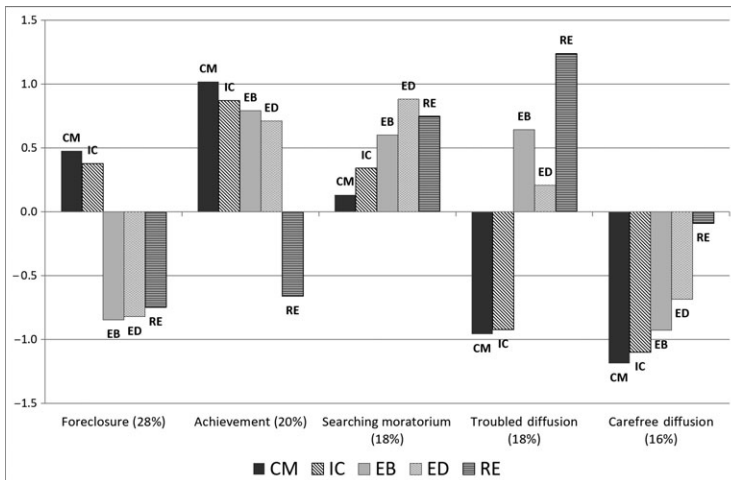

Figure 1. Z-Scores of identity processes (i.e., CM, commitment making; IC, identification with commitment; EB, exploration in breadth; ED, exploration in depth; RE, ruminative exploration) for the five clusters.
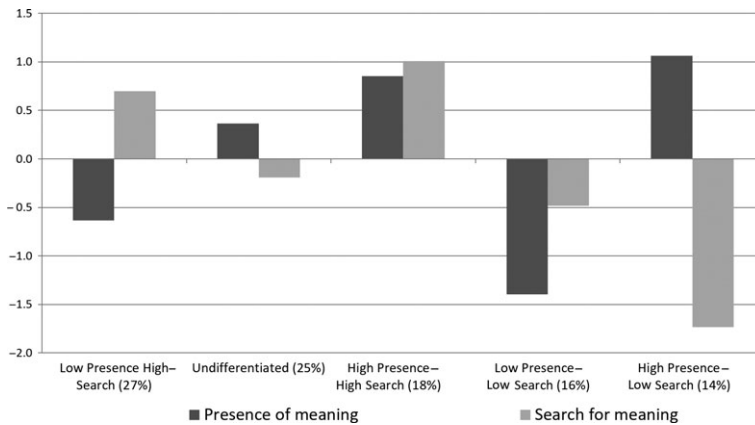
Figure 2. *Z*-scores of presence of meaning and search for meaning for the five clusters.

commitment processes, low levels in exploration processes); Achievement (20.2% of participants; high levels in commitment processes, exploration in breadth and in depth, and low levels of ruminative exploration); Troubled Diffusion (18% of participants; low levels in commitment processes, high levels in exploration in breadth and ruminative exploration, medium level of exploration in depth); Searching Moratorium (17.7% of participants; medium levels in commitment processes and high levels in all exploration processes); and Carefree Diffusion (15.9% of participants; low levels in all identity processes). These clusters were similar to those depicted in other studies on identity profiles in emerging adults (e.g., Luyckx *et al.*, 2011; Schwartz *et al.*, 2011).

For meaning in life, the five-cluster solution proved to be the most adequate. It explained (adjusted R^2) 79% of the variance in search for meaning and 75% of the variance in presence of meaning. In line with existing studies on meaning in life profiles (e.g., Dezutter *et al.*, 2014), the five clusters that emerged were labelled: Low Presence–High Search (27% of participants), Undifferentiated (25% of participants; medium–low levels of search for meaning and presence of meaning), High Presence–High Search (18% of participants), Low Presence–Low Search (16% of participants), and High Presence–Low Search (14% of participants). Surprisingly, theology students were overrepresented in the Low Presence–High Search cluster.

Links between religiosity and identity and meaning in life profiles
We conducted two sets of multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) with cluster membership as independent variable and subjective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions of religiosity as dependent variables. The *F*-values, with multiple pairwise combinations using Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) test, are presented in Table 3 (identity profiles) and Table 4 (meaning in life profiles).

Regarding the relation between religiosity dimensions and identity profiles, as expected, participants in the Achievement cluster reported stronger subjective religious experiences and engagement in religious behaviours than those with Troubled Diffusion profiles. Foreclosure and Achievement profiles were linked with stronger religious beliefs than the Carefree Diffusion profile.

Table 3. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and *post-hoc* cluster comparisons for dimensions of religiosity on identity processes clusters

	Identity processes clusters						
	Foreclosure $n = 91$	Achievement $n = 66$	Troubled diffusion $n = 59$	Searching moratorium $n = 58$	Carefree diffusion $n = 52$	$F(4, 318)$	η^2
Dimensions of religiosity							
Subjective religiosity	3.88	4.00[a]	3.53[b]	3.95	3.67	3.08**	.037
Behavioural religiosity	3.65	3.83[a]	3.44[b]	3.49	3.36[b]	3.50**	.042
Cognitive religiosity	3.89[a]	3.89[a]	3.56[b]	3.69	3.52[b]	4.34**	.052

Note. A cluster mean is significantly different from another cluster mean if they have different superscript letters.
**$p < .01$.

Regarding the relation between religiosity dimensions and meaning in life profiles, in line with our hypotheses, persons in the High Presence–High Search and High Presence–Low Search clusters reported the highest levels of subjective, behavioural, and cognitive religiosity. The Low Presence–Low Search cluster reported the lowest levels in all religiosity dimensions, followed by the Low Presence–High Search cluster. Participants in the High Presence–High Search cluster reported significantly more subjective religious experiences and involvement in religious behaviours than those with Low Presence–Low Search and those with Low Presence–High Search. A Low Presence–Low Search profile was associated with weaker religious beliefs and subjective experiences than all the other four profiles, followed by a Low Presence–High Search profile.

Table 4. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and *post-hoc* cluster comparisons for dimensions of religiosity on meaning in life clusters

	Meaning in life clusters						
	Low presence –high search $n = 86$	Undifferentiated $n = 78$	High presence –high search $n = 57$	Low presence –low search $n = 50$	High presence –low search $n = 44$	$F(4, 301)$	η^2
Dimensions of religiosity							
Subjective religiosity	3.61[a]	3.91[ab]	4.13[b]	3.54[a]	4.08[b]	5.47***	.066
Behavioural religiosity	3.42[b]	3.75[a]	3.89[a]	3.14[b]	3.78[a]	9.17***	.106
Cognitive religiosity	3.63[c]	3.83[ac]	4.01[a]	3.31[b]	3.99[a]	10.90***	.123

Note. A cluster mean is significantly different from another cluster mean if they have different superscript letters.
***$p < .001$.

To summarize, Study 2 brought forward an overrepresentation of participants in the Foreclosed identity status and in the Low Presence–High Search meaning in life cluster. The most adaptive profiles in terms of links with religiosity were Achievement, Foreclosure, and High Presence–High Search.

Discussion

Identity and meaning in life are core developmental assets during emerging adulthood. As young people become active agents of their own development, they project, explore, and commit to personal goals and gain a sense of meaning in their lives (Côté, 2002; Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Negru, Pop, Damian, & Moraru, 2011; Negru, Subţirică, & Opre, 2011). We analysed how religiosity is related to these intentional strivings in emerging adults enrolled in theological education by depicting: (1) identity strivings and meaning in life accounts in faith narratives (Study 1) and (2) links of profiles of personal identity and meaning in life to religious beliefs, behaviours, and subjective experiences (Study 2). Both studies highlighted that in terms of identity work, a Foreclosed status, with high personal commitment and reduced exploration, was dominant in faith narratives and in personal identity profiles. In narratives, meaning in life had a strong focus on presence of meaning through religious insights. Nonetheless, global meaning in life profiles brought forward that many emerging adults were searching for a meaning in their lives, while at the same time reporting lower levels of presence of meaning. Identity Achievement and High Presence–High Search profiles were linked to the highest levels of subjective, behavioural, and cognitive religiosity.

Religiosity narratives: An unbearable lightness of culture

Narratives were imbued with behavioural (e.g., prayer, fasting), subjective (e.g., feelings of closeness to God), and cognitive (e.g., cognitive appraisals on God's role in one's life) descriptions of religiosity. We depicted stable personal commitment to a life path linked to one's religiosity and to a less extent active self-exploration through religiosity. This foreclosed identity orientation was mirrored in the high prevalence of presence of meaning in life through one's religiosity. The strong faith commitment revealed through religiosity narratives makes Romanian emerging adults enrolled in theological education very similar to the 'traditionalists' (Smith & Snell, 2009) or 'committed conservatives' (Arnett, 2014) described in studies conducted on US emerging adults. The results of our qualitative study mirrored Cook *et al.* studies (2015), which also showed the upholding of a theological traditional faith in US Christian college students and graduates. Interestingly though, as a differentiation from these studies that depicted individuation in faith in older emerging adults (i.e., an increase in interest in spirituality, doubled by a decrease in interest in religion), our participants' commitments and life meaning-making through religion were deeply bound on the theological traditional faith. This finding can be linked to the fact that in Romania, theological schools give male graduates the professional qualification to become Christian Orthodox priests. As they prepare to become upholders of a traditional religious faith, it may be that their representations of identity and life meaning through religion are deeply bound to the religious dogmas. Hence, their faith narratives clearly link their personal identity and meaning in life to their religiosity. In this manner, the cultural context influenced theological students' personal development in a pervasive manner, marking an unbearably light and perpetual presence in their everyday lives.

Linking religion with identity and meaning in life profiles

On the bright side, our study highlighted that an identity Achievement profile is linked with the highest levels of religious subjective experiences, behaviours, and beliefs. Theology students who were committed to and identified with their current life goals and also actively explored these present choices (i.e., exploration in breadth and in depth) displayed the most complex religious life. Additionally, the meaning in life profile that was associated with the highest levels of subjective, behavioural, and cognitive religiosity was the High Presence–High Search profile. Those who actively investigated the strong sense of life meaning that they already possessed had multifaceted and intense religious experiences. These findings clearly point out that identity and meaning in life profiles are most adaptively linked to multidimensional religiosity when current commitments are doubled by proactive exploratory strivings. So, for this group of emerging adults who experience religion as a personal and professional pursuit, the most adaptive manner in which they can benefit from their religiosity is to keep investigating their present life choices and life meaning. This finding is in line with previous research, which pointed out that transcendence and fidelity (i.e., a term closely linked to meaning in life) are core dimensions of spirituality for highly spiritual youth (i.e., spiritual exemplars, King *et al.*, 2014). For the Romanian context, in this manner, the somewhat foreclosed ideological and social religious contexts theology students are exposed to (e.g., religion as school curriculum; daily interactions mainly with fellow theology students) can become more open to active, personally-relevant reflection, which may in turn facilitate their access to religion as a transcendent context (King *et al.*, 2011).

As previously detailed, the Foreclosure profile (27%) proved to be a double-edged sword. Many theology students seemed to have embraced their current life goals without further exploration, a choice that can be linked to the somewhat foreclosed cultural context, in which religion is an omnipresent axiom, a given (i.e., Christian Orthodox baptism is conducted shortly after birth), directly related to an institution perceived as trustworthy and powerful (i.e., the Orthodox church). Therefore, the Foreclosed profile proved to be somewhat adaptive in this cultural context, in that it was linked to higher levels of cognitive religiosity, but to lower levels of subjective and behavioural religiosity. These findings may indicate that Foreclosed theology students embraced the teaching of their religion (i.e., higher levels of cognitive religiosity), but they explored these teachings to a lesser degree (i.e., lower levels of subjective and behavioural religiosity). Hence, in line with previous study, a Foreclosed profile had a positive, but also a negative dimension (e.g., Luyckx *et al.*, 2009).

Furthermore, we uncovered a 'dark side' of identity and meaning in life strivings of theology students. In the total sample, 30% were experiencing identity Diffusion, either Troubled (i.e., a lot of exploration with a strong ruminative component, little commitment) or Carefree (i.e., little exploration, little commitment). These findings may indicate that the formal choice of a theological educational and career path is not necessarily related to strong identity commitments. In terms of meaning in life outlooks, the increased prevalence of Low Presence–High Search (27%) indicated that many emerging adults in our sample were involved in increasing their understanding of the significance of their lives, but did not hold a strong sense of life meaning. It may be that early commitment to theological studies, doubled by the overstructured nature of this line of education in Romania, may have thwarted the manner in which they developed their personal identity. These profiles were associated with weaker religious beliefs, subjective experiences, and behaviours. This can be linked to the negative long-term consequences of early developmental commitments (Luyckx *et al.*, 2011) and also to a foreclosed social

and ideological religious context, which limits access to religion as a transcendent context (King, 2003, 2008). It may be that religion is a dynamic social and ideological context for self-development when it is complemented by exploration in breadth and then in depth of alternative life paths, with extensive time to reflect upon past and present choices (Kimball *et al.*, 2013). This assumption is supported by longitudinal findings on U.S. youth, which show that 4 year after college graduation, Christian emerging adults had a well-integrated and communal spirituality, particularly when they were engaged in active reflection on the transformative events that occurred across time in their spiritual lives (Kimball, Cook, Boyatzis, & Leonard, 2016). It may be that these exploratory pursuits offer emerging adults the opportunity to further nuance their faith before making institutional religious commitments (Whitney & King, 2014).

Also, the postponement of personal commitments (i.e., identity Diffusion profiles) and detachment from significant analyses of meaning in one's life (i.e., Undifferentiated meaning in life profile), linked with very low levels in all religiosity dimensions, could be indicators of personal instability during the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2007). The participants in our study have chosen very early in their lives a specific life path (e.g., theology). It may be that for some of them, this early commitment reduced their willingness and possibly their abilities to actively explore future life paths and meanings, and to link their religiosity with these intentional pursuits. As previously discussed, active exploration of religious commitments during emerging adulthood is quite beneficial for (re)defining one's religiosity from a personal and also institutional standpoint during adulthood (Whitney & King, 2014). These negative outcomes of early religious commitments may be culturally specific outcomes that complement the detriments of high religiosity identified and analysed on highly religious U.S. emerging adults (e.g., lower levels of safe sexual behaviours, increased prejudice towards outgroups, Magyar-Russell, Deal, & Brown, 2014).

Summing up, we highlighted the multidimensionality of identity and meaning in life strivings in emerging adults attending theological schools. We pointed out that even in a somewhat foreclosed cultural context (e.g., Romanian Christian Orthodox theological schools), religion represents a dynamic social and ideological context for self-development. Future studies should focus on analysing these constructs from a longitudinal perspective and by actively including key agents of religious socialization in emerging adulthood (e.g., parents, Negru *et al.*, 2014).

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