

KEY TEXT

Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (1958)

A Psychosocial Interpretation of Luther and its Relevance for Understanding Religious Identity Formation Today

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Abstract

As part of NTT JTJR's series on Key Texts, the present article discusses Erik H. Erikson's interdisciplinary, psychohistorical study of the young Martin Luther, its reception, and its relevance for today. Erikson showed how Luther's own identity crisis – emerging from the troubled relationship with his father – converged with a crisis in late medieval society and theology, and how being a talented *homo religiosus* helped Luther to solve both crises at the same time, presenting a “religiosity for the adult man” in accordance with the Renaissance need for autonomy. It is argued that during his psychosocial study of Luther and the latter's cultural context, Erikson developed a general, existential theory of religion that is also relevant for an understanding of the search for identity and religion in modern times.

Keywords: Erik H. Erikson, Martin Luther, psychohistory, psychosocial development, identity crisis, existential identity, ultimate concerns, *homo religiosus*

Introduction

Erikson's psychohistorical study of the young Martin Luther hit the academic theological community like a bombshell.¹ Protestant church

¹ Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958).

historians, especially, fumed about the alleged reductionism of Luther's personal development and theology to his psychological problems, such as the troubled relationship with his father and his anal, obsessive personality. This was argued, for example, by the American church historian Roland H. Bainton,² and in this journal – although in a slightly more moderate tone – by the Amsterdam theologian W.J. Kooiman.³ Erikson was accused of “putting Luther on the couch” in an asynchronous way and of too readily transferring his problems with his parents to God, with his focus on the role of Luther's father and mother leading him to forge historical facts to fit psychoanalytical theory.

Yet, the book was also praised, even by its fiercest critics, for its complexity, the richness of Erikson's descriptive narrative, his great knowledge of historical and theological sources and context,⁴ and its relevance to an understanding of issues of identity and religion in modern times.⁵ As the American Lutheran theologian George A. Lindbeck phrased it: “How could so bad a book be so good?”⁶

With *Young Man Luther*, Erikson embarked upon an ambitious undertaking indeed. He became interested in Luther in the 1950s, when he was working as a psychoanalyst with troubled adolescents at the Austin Riggs Center in Stockbridge (MA, USA). He did not diagnose his young patients using psychopathological categories, as was common practice, but as having an “identity crisis.” This concept, coined by Erikson, is at the heart of his psychodynamic theory of human development. Luther, however, turned out to be more than an illustration of a young man with an identity crisis. Erikson's study of Luther led him to venture into the field of history and theology itself, and to throw light on the very nature of religion, the predicaments of modernity (the search for identity and the insecurities this brings

2 Ronald Bainton, “Luther: A Psychiatric Portrait,” *The Yale Review* (1959): 405-410. Donald Capps mentions that during a church history class at Yale Divinity School Bainton had called *Young Man Luther* “the worst book on Luther he had ever read.” Donald Capps, “Erik H. Erikson's *Young Man Luther*. A Classic Revisited,” *Pastoral Psychology* 64, no. 3 (2015), 327-343, 329.

3 W.J. Kooiman, “Een psychoanalyticus over Luther (II),” *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* XX (1965): 38-48.

4 See e.g., Heinrich Bornkamm, “Luther und sein Vater. Bemerkungen zu Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 66 (1969): 38-61. This German Luther scholar had a much more nuanced assessment of *Young Man Luther* than Bainton.

5 See H. Faber, “Een psychoanalyticus over Luther (I),” *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* XX (1965): 17-37 and Paul W. Pruyser, “Erikson's *Young Man Luther*: A New Chapter in the Psychology of Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 2, no. 2 (1963): 238-42.

6 George A. Lindbeck, “Erikson's *Young Man Luther*: A Historical and Theological Reappraisal,” *Soundings* (1973): 210-227.

with it), and the complex psycho-socio-cultural understanding of a *homo religiosus*: a “great religious man” who has transformed his time.

Erik H. Erikson: Life and life-cycle theory

Erik Homburger Erikson (1902-1994) was born in Frankfurt, Germany, to an unmarried Danish mother and an unknown Danish father. He was raised as the son of a Jewish child pediatrician called Homburger, who married his mother and adopted the young Erik. During his youth in Germany, Erik always felt like an outsider – in school as a Jew, and in *shul* as a *goy*, because of his Scandinavian looks, being tall, blonde and blue-eyed. Later, Erikson was educated in the Vienna psychoanalytic circle around Sigmund Freud, as a child therapist in the tradition of Anna Freud. In the 1930s he emigrated to the USA, where he would spend the rest of his life.

Erikson developed his own, particular strand of psychoanalysis. He has become primarily known as the founder of the first life-span theory of human development, the “life-cycle theory,” and was the originator of the concepts of “identity” and “basic trust,” which have remained influential concepts in developmental psychology to this day. Erikson has also been called “identity’s architect.”⁷ The life-cycle theory, presented in his first and best-known book *Childhood and Society*,⁸ consists of eight developmental stages that encompass the entirety of life, from birth to death. In each stage, a specific psychosocial “issue” or task comes to the fore: finding a balance between trust and mistrust; autonomy and shame; initiative and guilt; industry and inferiority; identity and role confusion; intimacy and isolation; generativity and stagnation; and ego integrity and despair. The psychosocial issues clearly have an existential ring, as compared to the Freudian terminology of oral, anal and genital stages. Erikson considered that they were all building blocks for the dynamic process of identity development throughout the life-course.

A crucial feature of Erikson’s life-cycle theory is its psychosocial nature. All human development, in Erikson’s view, is psychosocial: “the human life cycle and man’s institutions have evolved together.”⁹ Individual and

7 Lawrence J. Friedman, *Identity’s Architect, A Biography of Erik H. Erikson* (New York: Scribner, 1999).

8 Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950/1963²; London: Triad/Paladin Books, 1984).

9 Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 224.

communal, cultural development are intricately interwoven. Therefore, the (bodily, sexual, psychic and social) development of an individual can only be properly understood in the context of the person's life history and the time and place in which they live.

For Erikson, the fifth stage, identity versus identity confusion, played a pivotal role in this respect. In this stage, the adolescent has to integrate the previous stages into a new whole, and find answers to questions such as: Who am I?, What is the real me?¹⁰ What should I do with my life and where do I belong? It is in this stage that individual and societal development converge: the individual needs to be acknowledged by their environment as the person they are and want to become. What Erikson calls the "ideology" of a society plays an important role here: it is the totality of values and ideas current in a social group that gives a coherent meaning to life and allows us to make sense of what is happening in the world. The adolescent needs this as a "guidance of autonomous existence" and to re-establish a sense of "basic trust" in life. However, when a society is in crisis – such as the USA in the late 1950s and Christianity and the medieval church in Luther's time – the ideology no longer "works." We need gifted individuals such as Luther, who often have identity troubles themselves, to innovate and transform the ideology, so that it again fits the needs of their time. This is precisely what Erikson demonstrates in *Young Man Luther*.¹¹ In the following sections, I will show that, in analysing how Luther resolved his own identity problems and those of his time, Erikson also developed a theory of religion.¹²

Young Man Luther: Outline and argument

In brief, I will try to indicate that Luther, in laying the foundation for a 'religiosity for the adult man' displayed the attributes of his own hard-won

10 An expression of William James, quoted by Erikson in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), 19.

11 Erikson presented his ideas on identity formation in the life-cycle for the first time in *Childhood and Identity*, but elaborated on them in much more detail in *Young Man Luther*. In 1968 he published his studies on the identity crisis in a separate book, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*.

12 See Hetty Zock, *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern. Erik H. Erikson's Contribution to the Psychology of Religion* (Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 1990/2004²). For the following exposition of Erikson's argument in *Young Man Luther*, see especially Ch. III, "Religion as ideology. Nostalgia for the father and the existential identity," 86-94, 120-148, and Ch. IV, "*Young Man Luther*. The interplay between existential and psychosocial development illustrated." For a detailed summary of *Young Man Luther* and its place in Erikson's work, see Robert Coles, *Erik H. Erikson, The Growth of His Work* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), Ch. VIII, "Luther and history," 202-254.

adulthood; his renaissance of faith portrays a vigorous recovery of his own ego-initiative.¹³

Young Man Luther takes the form of an elaborate “case history,” or rather: a “life history,” as Erikson preferred to call it, to emphasize the importance of looking at a life in context.¹⁴ The book consists of seven chapters and an epilogue, in which he continually alternates between methodical and theoretical expositions, descriptions of the medieval cultural and religious context, and interpretations of Luther’s development and key events in his life. The complex argument is gradually taking shape in the course of the book. Erikson focuses on the seven years between 1505 and 1512, when Luther was in his mid-20s, which, in his view, roughly encompasses the period of Luther’s personal identity crisis.¹⁵ To explain why the identity problems of this talented young man were so severe, Erikson elaborately describes Martin’s youth and school life, the strict rules and harsh punishments that must have affected this sensitive boy more than his schoolmates, the great expectations of his father, who wanted him to become a lawyer, his scrupulous and melancholic problems, and the “melancholic world mood” of the late Middle Ages – a preoccupation with death, sinfulness and the Last Judgment.

As in a classic psychoanalytic case history, Erikson focuses on key events. First, there is the story about how Luther decided to become a monk, contrary to his father’s wish – caught in a thunderstorm, he made a promise to St. Anne (who was the patron saint of the miners, his father’s business) to enter the monastery. Second, there was his so called “fit in the choir,” a kind of epileptic attack which, according to legend, the young Luther was said to have suffered during a monastic service. On hearing the story of Jesus healing a possessed boy (Mark 9:14-29), he was said to have cried: “Non sum,” or: “Ich bin’s nicht.” This is interpreted by Erikson as a paradoxical denial of his father’s suspicion that his vocation was inspired by the devil, but also as an expression of the troubled adolescent’s feelings of being “nothing;” of having no sound basis for his identity, no ground to stand on. Third, Erikson discusses Luther’s anxiety attack when celebrating his first mass (in the presence of his father, before the heavenly Father). He argues that these half-legendary events, even if they did not really happen, contain a psychological truth – they could well have happened. What counts is that

13 Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 206.

14 See Pruyser, “Erikson’s *Young Man Luther*.”

15 This shows that Erikson does not operate with strict age boundaries to the life-cycle stages.

they accord with the full image of Luther's work and theology, his cultural historical background, and what his contemporaries said about him.

In brief, Erikson's thesis is that because of the very ambivalent relationship with his father, characterized by doubt, shame and guilt, Martin did not acquire a sufficient sense of basic trust, which is the foundation of all psychosocial identity development. Martin questioned his father's righteousness and doubted whether he could trust him, which must have overshadowed the basic trust he may have experienced in his relationship with his mother. His feelings towards his father were transferred to his relationship with God, and just as he experienced his father as harsh, Martin could only experience God as distant and vengeful – as a God one could not trust – and that was why his personal identity crisis was so severe. According to Erikson, the melancholic world mood of the Middle Ages only further aggravated this crisis. The dominant ideology of the time, the Christian theology of the late medieval church, could not help him to overcome these troubles, as it did not offer a viable way for autonomous-minded people on the verge of the Renaissance to relate to God, with its focus on church authority, ritual and mediation by the saints.

Erikson subsequently shows how Luther, after a long period of anxiety and intellectual quest, helped by his fatherly spiritual mentor Dr. Staupitz, discovered a new foundation for his faith and theology, which was summarized in Paul's words: "The just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17).¹⁶ This concerned a new relationship with God, acquired not by way of external rituals and authority, but by the interiorization of faith. The new focus was on "individual conscience, responsibility and autonomy, expressing the idea that man himself could directly deal with God, by using his own God-given apparatus."¹⁷ This discovery was crystallized in his "revelation in the tower" – which took place, as reported, at the same time that he found physical relief from his obstipation problems on the "cloaca" (toilet).

Thus, in Erikson's view, the solution to the collective identity crisis of the late Middle Ages converged with Luther's own psychosocial recovery. He became the famous church reformer by sketching a new, more autonomous relationship to God that was suited to the Renaissance – and modern times.

¹⁶ Erikson mentions that it was during Luther's study of the Psalms that he developed his new theological insights. He distinguishes three essential ideas in Luther's theology: the affirmation of voice and word as the instruments of faith; the new recognition of God's "face" in the passion of Christ; and the redefinition of a just life. In his interpretation of Luther's theology, Erikson was highly influenced by Erich Vogelsang's 1929 study *Die Anfänge von Luthers Christologie* (Berlin: De Gruyter 1929).

¹⁷ Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 207.

Moreover, on the way, he re-established a reasonably good relationship with his parents. Therefore, the “fit in the choir,” Erikson argues, can be characterized as an event “at the crossroads of mental disease and religious creativity.”¹⁸

Existential identity and the *homo religiosus*

However, there is still something more to be found in Erikson’s analysis. During his studies of the psychosocial problems of Luther and his time, he discovered the specific role of religious traditions in this respect, and developed a theory of religion related to existential identity development. Erikson argues that it was not only due to young Martin’s sensitivity, the problematic relationship with his parents, and the crisis of the medieval theology that his identity problems were so severe. They must also be seen in the light of his being a *homo religiosus*, which he understood as a personality type that is intensely occupied with existential questions: the “problems of human existence,”¹⁹ “the questions of how to escape corruption in living and how in death to give meaning to life,”²⁰ someone in search of “a highest good”²¹ – of values that are worth living and dying for.

In *Young Man Luther*, Erikson further elaborated his theory of identity formation by distinguishing an explicit “vertical,” existential line of development from a “horizontal” psychosocial one. Horizontal identity concerns psychosocial development in a concrete sociocultural historical context – it is finite in space and time. Vertical identity represents “the identity of knowing transcendence,”²² which consists of a relationship with a transcendent, infinite “Higher Identity,” in which the psychosocial identity is anchored. Thus, an existential identity is the very basis on which psychosocial identity development can take place. While existential questions are always to some extent part of adolescents’ identity formation, for a *homo religiosus* such as Luther they constitute the core of their identity.²³

18 Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 38.

19 Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 22.

20 Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 261.

21 Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 97.

22 Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 179.

23 “It is precisely because the *homo religiosus* is haunted by existential ‘nothingness’, that he experiences so strongly the relativity ... of every established psychosocial identity. ... He continuously questions values and norms, is very perceptive, and has a precocious moral sensitivity. Therefore, the mood of a *homo religiosus* is by definition a melancholic one, characterized by

In this theory of existential identity, Erikson was highly influenced by the theology of his friend Paul Tillich.²⁴ Here, we can recognize Tillich's conviction that it is "at the boundary between transcendence and finitude that human beings explore issues of 'Ultimate Concern'"²⁵ and approach God as "the ground of being." A "Higher Identity" in Erikson's view, thus consists of a consciousness of one's existential nothingness – the utter finiteness of all psychosocial identity before a transcendent identity. By consciously and positively identifying with one's finiteness, a relationship with this Higher Identity takes shape and a sense of existential identity emerges, on which a psychosocial identity can be established. In Luther's theological language: it is by internalizing the passion of Christ, and the inner conscience that one is a sinner, that a human being may be justified and can relate to God. It is in the scriptures that Martin finally discovered this existential identity, as the only real and reliable foundation and source of basic trust, on the basis of which he could formulate a new religious ideology that also led to communal psychosocial recovery because it matched the changing socio-cultural circumstances of late medieval society.

It must be noticed that Erikson's theory of existential identity has a specific Christian colouring, based as it is on Luther's theological idea that one must affirm one's sinfulness and nothingness before a "father."²⁶ However, Erikson did argue that non-religious ideologies might also provide this existential anchor for psychosocial identities, insofar as they could also offer a "Higher Identity;" for example, in the form of the higher values of human dignity and solidarity. In this way, he sketched the existential infrastructure underlying very diverse ideological traditions. Nevertheless, he accorded a special role to religious traditions, as being more sensitive to the finiteness and "nothingness" of human existence.²⁷

To conclude this section, Erikson fully developed his existential view of human development in *Young Man Luther*, a glimmer of which is already discernible in the first formulation of his life-cycle theory. Moreover, he developed a theory of religion that is suitable for studying very diverse

'tentationes tristitiae – that sadness which is a traditional temptation of the homo religiosus'.

Zock, *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern*, 136.

24 See Friedman, *Identity's Architect*, 343-347.

25 Friedman, *Identity's Architect*, 344.

26 As Donald Capps rightly remarks, the theological idea that one must accept one's nothingness in order to achieve an identity "may seem nonsensical from the traditional perspective of ego psychology, but makes perfect sense theologically." Capps, "Erikson's Life-Cycle Theory: Religious Dimensions," *Religious Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (April 1984): 120-127, 125.

27 Zock, *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern*, 225-239.

religious and spiritual traditions and expressions. This turned Erikson's psychological theory into an actual psychology of religion and even an existential psychology. It was the *homo religiosus* Luther that helped him discover and develop this insight.

Reception

Erikson's life-cycle theory and his ideas about identity formation and basic trust have been widely used, adapted and empirically researched in developmental psychology,²⁸ and it is one of the theoretical pillars of James W. Fowler's still much used model of faith development.²⁹ Moreover, similar to Freudian terms such as "projection" and the "unconscious," Erikson's concepts of "basic trust" and "identity" have also become part of daily language and popular psychology, liberated in the same way from his specific psychoanalytic theory and approach. However, it is striking that *Young Man Luther* is much less known and referenced than *Childhood and Society* and *Identity: Youth and Crisis* and that the existential-religious character of his theory is not generally acknowledged in psychology.³⁰ Erikson's biographer Friedman mentions the limited reception of *Young Man Luther* after publication, with the exception of theologians and scholars of religious studies.³¹ This may be due to the fact that the book cannot be properly categorized: first, because of its complex interdisciplinary perspective, which was innovative at the time; second, because his psychohistorical and hermeneutical undertaking does not fit well in the dominant tradition of quantitative research in psychology; and third, because of Erikson's somewhat idiosyncratic and inimitable style and narrative approach.

Yet, *Young Man Luther* is beyond doubt considered to be a classic text. It was translated into several languages and is still in press. It is included in many classics' series, handbooks, and readers in psychology and religion, such as Kenneth R. Stunkel's *Fifty Key Works of History and Historiography* (2012), Tom Butler-Bowdon's *Fifty Psychology Classics* (2017) and David Wulff's

28 For example, on the basis of Erikson's identity theory, James Marcia developed his "identity status theory," proposing four identity statuses in psychological identity development to be researched empirically via semi-structured interviews. James Marcia et al, *Ego Identity. A Handbook for Psychosocial Research* (Springer Verlag, 1993).

29 James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

30 See Zock, *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern*.

31 Friedman, *Identity's Architect*, 281-286.

seminal handbook *Psychology of Religion. Classic and Contemporary* (1997).³² His ideas about existential identity have to some extent been taken up in psychology of religion and pastoral psychology. In particular, the American pastoral theologian Donald Capps has freely and creatively used Erikson's work in his pastoral psychology, adapting it to his own context.³³ Finally, in the cultural arena, the British playwright and film producer John Osborne, a member of the so called "angry young men" movement, based his at the time very successful play "Luther" (1961) on *Young Man Luther* – without acknowledging his source, by the way.³⁴ However, the key question here, of course, is why the book may still be considered as a classic text today.

Relevance for today

Young Man Luther is relevant in three important respects: 1) in applying his psychohistorical, hermeneutic method, Erikson showed that individual and sociocultural development are closely connected and should always be studied in interrelation; 2) Erikson's view on identity formation as a complex, life-long process, involving cultural and existential challenges, presaged the search for identity in our uncertain and rapidly changing modern times; 3) the theory of religion developed in the book, as concerning the existential infrastructure of human individual and group development, is relevant to an understanding of the variety of contemporary religious and spiritual expressions. Let me briefly enlarge on this.

Psychohistory and biography

Erikson is considered as the founder of "psychohistory," and *Young Man Luther* as the first psychohistorical study.³⁵ His contribution to historical science and religious studies consists in analysing how both Luther's genius

32 It is in particular psychodynamic psychologists of religion who have been interested in *Young Man Luther*. See for instance Janet Liebman Jacobs and Donald Capps, eds., *Religion, Society, and Psychoanalysis. Readings in Contemporary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

33 See, for example, Donald Capps, *Men, Religion, and Melancholia. James, Otto, Jung, and Erikson* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997); "Erikson's Life-Cycle Theory," in *The Decades of Life. A Guide to Human Development* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); "Erik H. Erikson's *Young Man Luther*: A Classic Revisited," *Pastoral Psychology* 64, no. 3 (2015): 327-343. Hetty Zock, "Human Development and Pastoral Care in a Postmodern Age: Donald Capps, Erik H. Erikson, and Beyond," *Journal of Religion & Health*, 57, no 2 (2018): 437-450.

34 Friedman, *Identity's Architect*, 282.

35 Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Psychohistory and Religion. The Case of Young Man Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

and the psychosocial problems of this troubled and gifted individual contributed to his historical impact. To paraphrase his own words, he showed how Luther's "case" became a historical event.³⁶ However, Erikson did not like his work being labelled as psychohistory. He argued that what would be of real value is that historians start integrating psychological theories in their research and historiography,³⁷ as individual development should always be studied in connection with communal cultural developments. In *Young Man Luther* and his other studies of great religious figures, Erikson showed how biographical studies can also add colour to the cultural-historical portrait of an era. Such an approach is nowadays evident in the – currently very popular – genre of the biography. Tom Bower's 2020 biography *Boris Johnson: The gambler* may serve as an example here. Bower sketches the personality and psychological background of Johnson, the situation of Great Britain after Brexit, and the British class and boarding school culture as factors to understand Johnson's role in present-day politics.

Identity formation as a life-long, sociocultural existential process

Although Erikson's *Identity: Youth and Crisis* is better known in developmental psychology, it was in *Young Man Luther* that he addressed and explained the complexities and nuances of the processes of identity formation and identity crisis. Here, Erikson demonstrated that identity formation is a life-long, dynamic process, which is not strictly confined to adolescence. Luther was 34 years old when he finally articulated his new theology and affirmed his psychosocial and vocational identity, by opposing the church of his time. Moreover, Erikson emphasizes that Luther's identity crisis was not resolved once and for all: his identity troubles would re-emerge in his later life.³⁸ This is also true of identity formation in rapidly changing, late modern societies, in which the search for identity predominates – or rather identities and their intersectionality.³⁹ The intrinsic linking of identities with sociocultural backgrounds has become a prominent issue today, and brings societal tensions with it – think of the present discussions on racism, dealing with the colonial past, and LGBTQ+ issues.

36 Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, Ch. I, "Case and Event."

37 "As historians became more conscious of psychological life, he hoped that the 'psychohistory label' would disappear." Friedman, *Identity's Architect*, 282. Erikson would later enlarge on his ideas on psychohistory in *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York: Norton, 1975).

38 See *Young Man Luther*, Ch. VII, "Faith and Wrath."

39 "Active identity formation strategies are increasingly important in our postmodern age, characterized by individualization, relativity of values and restructuring of social systems." Augustine Nwoye, "The Multicultural Relevance of Erikson's *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*," *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 13, no. 1 (2015): 67–78, 75.

A theory of religion: existential infrastructure and a non-reductionist approach

In *Young Man Luther*, Erikson developed a theory of religion concerned with existential, ultimate issues. For him, existential identity lays at the basis of psychosocial development and constitutes the infrastructure, so to speak, of the diverse religious, spiritual and other ideological traditions. This theory of religion is relevant to the study of religion and spiritual care today. Now that the influence of the churches and other religious organizations and traditions is decreasing, at least in the Western world, the search for a meaningful life has been individualized. There is a great interest in spirituality (in the wide sense of the word), and in how to deal with existential life events, including pain, suffering and loss, and feelings of impotence when faced with social challenges such as inequality, institutional and other violence, and disasters such as climate change. The current interest in authors such as Irvin D. Yalom (existential psychotherapy) and Viktor Frankl (existential analysis) also demonstrates this preoccupation with existential issues. More specifically, Erikson's view of existential identity development anticipated present theories of meaning-making and spirituality, and offers a framework that may help us to understand and evaluate deinstitutionalized, fluid forms of religion in our secular time. To give a few examples: The field of pastoral and spiritual care in plural, secularized countries is nowadays referred to as concerning "spiritual and existential issues" – terms which are often used synonymously.⁴⁰ The Dutch spiritual caregiver Job Smit has emphasized the importance of a generic discourse on spiritual care – that is, a discourse anchored in a philosophical-anthropological foundation, and not in a specific religious tradition.⁴¹ In the model he has developed, "existential well-being" is seen as the overarching goal of spiritual care practices. Further, the presently dominant narrative approach in pastoral and spiritual care, focusing on the life-story of the pastor's interlocutor, is in line with Erikson's view of a person's life history as the place where meaning is constructed and found.

The second relevant feature of Erikson's theory of religion is that it includes both a functional and a substantive approach. Religious and cultural

40 See for instance the Dutch professional standard of chaplains by the VGVZ (Dutch Association for Spiritual Care) (2015), <https://vgvz.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Beroepsstandaard-2015.pdf>; Lars Johan Danbolt et al., "Existential Care in a Modern Society: Pastoral Care Consultations in Local Communities in Norway," *International Journal for Practical Theology* 25, no. 1 (2021): 20–39.

41 Job Smit, *Antwoord geven op het leven zelf: een onderzoek naar de basismethodiek van de geestelijke verzorging* (Delft: Eburon, 2015).

traditions and historical events have their own substance and influence, as becomes clear in Erikson's Lutheran and Tillichian view of existential identity. Such identities cannot be reduced to their function in promoting psychosocial health. Thus, Erikson's work may help us to be more attentive to ahistorical, acontextual tendencies in psychological theories about meaning and spirituality, and to a purely functional study of religion. In contrast to the negative judgements of Bainton and Kooiman, Erikson's approach to Luther is not reductionistic at all. He does throw new light on the function that religion and theology played in the psychosocial recovery of Luther and his time, but he avoids medicalizing and psychologizing personal, religious and cultural, historical developments.⁴²

Concluding remark

Young Man Luther is still an important book. This is not to say that some of Erikson's ideas do not need an update – such as his views on male and female gender and sexuality – or that his insights can be simply applied to the present-day context. Erikson would be the first to agree with this. Concomitant to his own sociocultural approach, he was aware of the cultural relativity of all academic work, and emphasized that the particular personal and sociocultural context of authors can always be found back in their work.⁴³

Erikson's theory of religion has a specific Western and Christian dimension; it was inspired by his youth in Germany and his personal fascination with German Lutheranism, his own preoccupation with "fathers," and the American context of the late 1950s. Notwithstanding, he managed to throw a new, fascinating light on Luther's life and theology. Moreover, as Donald Capps has noted: "... a text *becomes* a classic because readers find it personally meaningful to them and ... it remains a classic because readers discover over the course of their lives new ways in which it is meaningful to them."⁴⁴ As such, *Young Man Luther* remains a source of inspiration for those who want to approach human development and sociocultural phenomena

42 Rubén Arjona, "Erik H. Erikson's *Young Man Luther*: A Classic Revisited, Again," *Pastoral Psychology* 68 (2019): 591-603.

43 On Erikson's cultural sensitivity, see also Arjona, "Erik H. Erikson's *Young Man Luther*," and Nwoje, "The Multicultural Relevance of Erikson's *Young Man Luther*." Arjona has argued that *Young Man Luther* has helped to foster "intercultural awareness" in pastoral theology, and Nwoje highlights its relevance to multicultural studies.

44 Capps, "Erik H. Erikson's *Young Man Luther*," 328.

from a psychological-hermeneutical perspective that is sensitive to the existential and religious dimension of human life.

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