

Chapter 5

The elusive self: Psychological and social functions of identity

As individuals express their life, so they are.

Karl Marx¹

Professionals who work with youth need to understand how identity is formed, as well as being able to evaluate its functions – to judge when it is healthy and when it is unhealthy. These needs are addressed in this and the following two chapters.

The chapter looks at the construct identity in a general way, identifying its personal and cultural dimensions. It concludes with a discussion of a number of identity-related issues. It is followed by a chapter that considers research insights into identity, working towards a view of identity and identity health that will be useful for education. Because identity has a prominent place in young people's personal development, and because consumer culture gives special attention to youth's identity vulnerabilities, the third chapter examines this developmental task, particularly the way young people negotiate perceived social reality about identity.

5.1 What is understood by identity: How the construct is used in contemporary discourse

Identity is central to thinking about culture and ethnicity, as well as being a key dimension to religion. Identity is also prominent in many psychological theories, with those of Erikson and Kegan being among the most well known. While identity is a fundamental property of the human person, like spirituality, it is difficult to define, and the processes that affect its development are many and complex.

Identity has to do with answers to the question 'who am I?' Inevitably, it has both psychological and sociological dimensions as individuals think of themselves as distinct persons while also belonging to cultural reference groups. Also inevitably, to varying degrees, culture will have a shaping influence on individuals' personal identity. Thus a key to analysing identity will be the complex interactions between individuals and cultural identity resources.

Identity is the term that indigenous peoples (such as the Native Americans and Australian Aborigines) often like to use in preference to culture or religion, as do many in the Jewish community. While all in society usually have some sense of ethnicity, the strength of the identification varies considerably, from the passionate to the indifferent. Sometimes ethnicity may be a more pronounced part of people's felt identity when they are a minority group because it helps distinguish them from the dominant groups in society. As well as being important for self-expression, ethnicity has a supportive and defensive function, particularly if the group is oppressed or marginalised. Nothing binds a group together more than a sense of being oppressed.

A common concern of ethnic communities in Westernised societies is the maintenance of their distinctiveness in terms of cultural continuity in the context of a

wider culture that is secularised. They consider that the survival of ethnic identity requires the preservation of history, language, customs and religion against the eroding effects of the host culture. Of particular concern is the tendency of many youth to identify more with a global teenage culture than with their ethnic heritage; if they are 'homogenised' into popular culture, their role as historical carriers of a distinctive tradition may be eclipsed. For some young people, the situation prompts questions like 'How much traditional ethnic culture do we really need?' 'Can I not retain some sense of distinctive origins while fitting in harmoniously with the popular culture?' Also, there is the possibility of conflict in values and lifestyle.

By acknowledging a national identity in relatively multicultural countries, people can see their distinctive ethnicity within a wider framework. Similarly, a religious identity can be part of an ethnic identification, while it can also cut across ethnic boundaries because it includes a diversity of cultural or ethnic groups. How well and how harmoniously such identity diversity works will vary from place to place and from time to time. People can feel comfortable with it, seeing the diversity as a source of cultural riches; but it can also be uncomfortable, and in the extreme, ethnic or racial prejudices and hatreds fuel violence.

This situation in multicultural countries can be summarised as follows. People develop a sense of personal identity through complex interplay between five centres of influence:

1. the popular culture (expressed particularly in lifestyle options and consumerism)
2. distinctive ethnic and/or religious heritage
3. the national identification – the overall social and political context that hosts the component cultures
4. the personal needs, interests and ambitions of individuals
5. the family group, often displaced to a large extent by friendship groups in adolescence, which serves as a moderator of the above influences. **[list not styled]**

The particular profile of an individual's identity depends on the psychological mix from these influences. Many identity issues emerge from these interactions, for example multiculturalism, multi-faith society, intercultural communication, limits to tolerance, racism, religious prejudice, ecumenism, as well as in the more personal, psychological identity problems of individuals.

Religious identity can be an influential part of people's lives, giving members of a faith tradition a sense of belonging to a community of believers with a long history. It usually defines a pattern of desired beliefs and morals. It has access to resources in spirituality and social structures that can guide people's lives and animate local religious communities. But religious identity can also cause problems. It can be used for justifying sectarianism – and in the extreme, violence and ethnic cleansing. Of about 160 civil conflicts in the world in 1994, in about two-thirds of them religious identity was a recognisable component in the complex mixture of causes.² The pattern has a long history.

5.2 The emotional substrate to identity

When the word 'identity' is used, what is probably just as significant as its meaning is the emotion attached to its use. So it is important to know something of the feelings that are being referenced when someone uses the word. For example, talk about identity by indigenous people often carries sadness and anger that Western culture and economic exploitation have eroded their traditional way of life. For minority ethnic

groups, it can be the feeling of being under siege – having to fight to prevent the erosion of distinctiveness by the dominant culture. For some religious people, it is the feeling of frustration that their faith is in decline; and that if only there was a return to authority and earlier traditions, things would improve. Understanding identity needs to include awareness of the emotional and values agenda behind people's use of the word.

Sometimes it appears that identity only becomes an issue when something is going wrong, or where there is anxiety about the present or the future. If everything seems to be going well, identity may not be questioned. But when uncertainty, rapid change or dramatic unforeseen events occur, the relative security and psychic calmness of individuals can be disturbed and it becomes evident in the questioning of identity. For example:

- When the space shuttle *Challenger* blew up in 1986 and when the *Columbia* disintegrated during re-entry in 2003, there was some soul-searching in the United States, and not just in NASA.
- The Vietnam war, now more than thirty years on, still tears at the American psyche – success in war had been an important part of national identity in the United States, but Vietnam called it into question; in addition, it challenged the morality of US involvement and it created identity problems for the Vietnam veterans. There were some national identity concerns over the 1991 Gulf war and even more related to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.
- Personal trauma like loss of a job, the breakdown of a relationship, divorce or death of a family member can jolt identity, calling for a personal evaluation.
- The persistent loss of games by one's favourite team can cause depression and may raise identity questions. Often the coach is treated like a scapegoat before a new leader is signed up to resuscitate the team identity. On the other hand, when the team is on a winning streak, the sense of identity it supports is secure and makes all of those who share it feel the success.

5.3 Dimensions to personal identity

In addition to the social questions that revolve around it, identity also has various personal dimensions. When individuals answer for themselves the question 'Who am I?', there is both a simple answer and more complex ones. The simple answer: at a basic level I am a named person and, given ongoing good mental health, I will retain this consciousness throughout my life. The other answers: I have multiple components to my identity according to the various human groups in which I participate; I have self-knowledge with some insight into my beliefs, motives and behaviour – my *moral identity*; yet there are parts of me that always seem to remain mysterious and not fully understood; and I am forever changing my personal outlook on life, even if slowly, as I meet new aspects of physical ageing and new challenges in personal, social and professional life.

Personal identity is both a given, unchanging entity and at the same time a lifelong process of continual change. At some psychological level, people may spend all of their lives reflecting on, and articulating for themselves, partial answers to questions about their needs and motives.

Some of the dimensions or components to personal identity include the following:

Gender and family identities: As illustrated above, these components also carry both simple and complex answers about who individuals are. They may include personal agendas that require attention for considerable periods in the life cycle.

Group identities: Just as people join in various groups for different activities, so they have component group-related sub-identities. For example, a young person may have component identity dimensions spread across their religion, school, part-time work, social group, preferred music and entertainment, sport and leisure activity, as well as through people they admire like music and film stars, and sporting heroes and heroines.

Religious identity refers to the extent to which individuals draw on religious traditions to describe and live out their identity; it is the extent to which formal religion influences their lives. *Moral identity* refers to the profile of values, beliefs, ethical code and commitments that gives direction to their lives and colours their interaction with others. The *conscious* moral identity may not always coincide with the *lived* or *implied* moral identity. The quotation from Karl Marx at the beginning of this chapter suggests that the way people live implies an operative moral identity: ‘as individuals express their life, so they are.’

Among the cultural resources available to people for the articulation and maintenance of their sense of identity, consumer goods and lifestyle options are particularly prominent. In this sense, people can have a *retail identity* where consumer goods, together with the strong media-orchestrated images that go with them, appear to make a significant contribution.

Individuals could be said to have an ‘identity profile’ at any time. A snapshot of a period of their lives would show how their thinking, emotional energy and behaviour were partitioned into various component identities. The priority or relative weighting given to these components would be significant for any review of life. Some could look at their implied identity profile and say ‘Yes, that is a good picture of what I am’. Others might get a shock because what they see conflicts with the view of self they like to project – there may be elements in their behaviour they do not want to acknowledge. Perhaps for all people there will be some degree of mismatch between who they are and what sort of a person they would like to be.

The different types or components of identity refer to particular dimensions of personal life or to reference groups or situations that affect the individual.

Table 5.1 Summary of components or dimensions to a personal identity

Type of identity	Aspect of life to which it relates
Personal	Who the named individual is
Gender	Male or female
Sexual identity	Heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual
Moral	The core values and moral code that show what the person is like
Personality	How one appears to friends and acquaintances; how one ‘presents’ to others
Age	The age group with which the person identifies
Family	Identification with a particular family or families
Spiritual	How people see themselves as spiritual; how they perceive and relate to a spiritual-moral dimension to life
Religious	How religion affects people’s sense of themselves as spiritual; how they are linked with an organised religion; how religion enters into their lives
Psychological	What and how individuals think about their own psychological

	functioning; their understanding of their idiosyncratic mixture of needs, interests, attitudes, values and patterns of behaviour; their understanding of why they behave and live as they do
Ideals, passions, commitments	Particular ideals, passions, interests and commitments that occupy the individual's attention and that illustrate the direction being taken in life
Ethnic	The extent to which people identify with a particular ethnic group or groups
Cultural	The extent to which people refer to particular cultural groups or cultural styles in their lives
Regional and national identities	Whether regional and national reference points are prominent in the individual's makeup
Historical	How personal and social history help define the individual
Dress	The relative emphasis on dress styles and fashion; how important dress may be to self-perception
Work	The extent to which work/employment is prominent in the individual's sense of self
Sport	How prominent are sport and sporting groups in people's thinking, interests and behaviour
Leisure	The types and extent of leisure pursuits that characterise the individual
Retail	How the purchase and use of consumer goods enter into self-understanding and self-expression
Conflictual	How an understanding of the identity of self and others affects conflict; how identity influences the liking or disliking of other individuals or groups

Identification: Related to the role of component identities is the process of personal identification: how and why individuals link themselves with particular identities. It is a basic personality dynamic, it can contribute to the healthy development and fulfilment of individuals and it can be psychologically damaging, with both personal and social repercussions.

Take, for example, the place of identification in relation to employment. Sometimes it is said that an individual is too strongly identified with a job. Men who have invested too many personal resources in their jobs have little time or emotional space left for other aspects or people in their lives; and then, if their jobs are made redundant, or if they have a midlife crisis that results in a loss of satisfaction with their work, the result can be traumatic. There is a high frequency of suicide in men over retirement age. The tendency to define individuals' personal worth in terms of their jobs is a potentially dangerous identification. On the other hand, if individuals do not identify with their job to a minimal level, then the work itself will probably suffer because they take no pride or satisfaction in it.

5.4 Personal and group identities

What was said in the Chapter 2 about personal and cultural meanings can be applied to personal and group identities, acknowledging the importance of social interaction in identity development.

5.5 Projective and defensive functions of identity

Identity, in both its personal and group forms, has two key functions, *projective* and *defensive*.

The projective function of identity is the way in which it projects or displays the characteristics of the individual (or group). It describes or publicly announces identity and shows what the individual (or group) stands for.

At the same time as it signals the characteristics of the individual, identity definition provides psychological protection. Identity includes internal resources that the individual can fall back on in times of stress or trouble. It is what literature describes as people's 'true mettle' or character. The defensive or protective function of identity comes into play when individuals feel that they are under attack, whether physical or psychological or both.

5.6 Identity issues

The remainder of this chapter looks at a selection of identity-related issues to identify and open up questions for further study; these same questions might be investigated by young people in an educational setting.

- 5.6.1 Identity and status anxiety
- 5.6.2 Identity relationships with religion
- 5.6.3 Identity, conflict and violence in the Australian context and internationally
- 5.6.4 Identity and terrorism
- 5.6.5 Identity relationships with the non-human world
- 5.6.6 *Homo economicus*: The rise and rise of economic identity
- 5.6.7 Relationships between media, the state and national identity

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5.6.1 Identity and status anxiety

Until the post-World War II period in Western countries, few people had the lifestyle options and freedoms that are so readily taken for granted today. In those times, most people had little choice or variety in their choice of clothing and leisure entertainment. But even though they did not have the opportunities open to the rich, and even if they were painfully aware of social and economic inequities, they had a sense of a stable *station in life* that was not in question and that helped to make their lives purposeful and relatively enjoyable, even in difficult circumstances. Now, both rich and poor alike have the good life presented to them on television in most vivid and attractive formats.

In addition, there is the subtle suggestion that it is not only available to all, but that all have a *right* to it – as the pop lyrics say, 'I want it all. And I want it now!' And both rich and poor have internalised the message. For example, research studies in North America have shown that both rich and poor children had 'an equal and unslakeable thirst for designer clothes'.³ Seeing the plethora of commodity and lifestyle opportunities put before them every day, they feel they should be able to have them. But for many it will never happen. As a consequence for these same people, the disparity between desire and reality is always present. It generates a low level of anger and anxiety simmering in the background of their consciousness that occasionally erupts. More anger and envy is caused by what their peers have and they do not. No longer are people satisfied with the station in life they were born into, and their lifestyle aspirations can have a significant bearing on their behaviour, and on their happiness and wellbeing.

As far as beauty is concerned, the discrepancy between self-perception and the perfection constantly portrayed in the advertising models can be depressing – and not just for the young. If great store is placed on apparent attractiveness and social status according to television standards, then it is understandable that a low sense of self-worth will depress a significant number of teenagers.

The problem is called *status anxiety*. And it has much to do with the way that consumerism and advertising enter into the dynamics of identity development, particularly as regards the *identity vulnerability* of youth. In his book on status anxiety, de Botton highlighted the identity slavery that dependence on the judgments of others can entail.

The attentions of others might be said to matter to us principally because we are afflicted by a congenital uncertainty as to our own value – as a result of which, what others think of us comes to play a determining role in how we are able to view ourselves. Our sense of identity is held captive by the judgments of those we live among.⁴

He pointed to a level of vacillation about self that is common. Addressing the problem would seem to be an important step towards identity maturity.

We would, in an ideal world, be more impermeable [to the judgments of others] ... If we had carried out a fair appraisal of ourselves and decided upon our value, another person's suggestion of our irrelevance would not wound us. We would know our worth. Instead, we appear to hold within ourselves a range of divergent views as to our characters. We have evidence of both cleverness and stupidity, humour and dullness, importance and superfluity. And in such wavering conditions, it typically falls to the attitude of society to settle the question of our significance. Neglect highlights our latent negative self assessments, while a smile or complement as rapidly brings out the converse. We seem beholden to the affections of others to endure ourselves ... There is something sobering and absurd in the extent to which we are cheered by attention and damaged by disregard.⁵

The issue is significant for identity health (Chapter 6) and for youth identity dynamics (Chapter 7).

5.6.2 Identity relationships with religion

The headlines of a recent newspaper article reporting church strategies to increase membership read: 'Christianity is fine, but please don't mention the church'.⁶

A marketing agency, commissioned by the Bible Society, found evidence from its focus groups that the idea of Christianity and its central gospel message was well accepted, but that for a number of reasons the image of the organised church was far from attractive. The article suggested: 'The church is virtually the last image that should be used by Christian organisations to attract followers to God.' A list of reasons for the poor image included: abuse of children, intolerance, narrow views on sexuality, hypocrisy, being too judgmental, and prejudice against women. The report said that the findings were not unexpected. Also prominent in the report was reference to a contemporary spirituality that was less tied to institutional structures, church attendance and teachings (see Chapter 8). The findings applied to all age groups, but particularly to youth.

It is ironic that one of the cultural agencies that ought be able to offer a place of support, affirmation and community to adolescents is seen by many of them as an alien space. Their experience of the local church is not one where they feel a democratic, egalitarian atmosphere that welcomes them and makes them feel at home, or where their ideas and contributions are regarded as valuable. As a consequence, they tend not to draw on their traditional religion to help them formulate a sense of identity and belonging.

This situation applies to all the mainline Christian churches in Australia. But Catholic schools still remain attractive to the Catholic community – indeed they cannot accommodate all who would like to enrol. It is apparent that what the schools are offering is regarded as desirable, while the Church itself is not.

The reasons for hesitation about a role for religion in personal identity are complex. Hence there is no simple formula for successfully getting youth to participate in church life. Not all are ready to assimilate the Church's theology, life-wisdom and liturgy.

Any efforts to communicate a particular religious identity, or indeed a particular set of values, needs to acknowledge that it is not a simple communication process: it ultimately involves a free personal affirmation and acceptance by the receiver, and it involves more than the communication of knowledge. Attempts to make a particular religious identity accessible to young people is likely to be more attractive (and probably more effective) if they are not exclusivist. Trying to promote a 'package deal' that precludes individuals' growing involvement in a more autonomous, reflective process of spirituality and identity development will only tend to alienate them. The religious identity that an adult group wishes to hand on to its young people needs to be kept open to evaluation. Thus the identity the group desires to communicate would not be a hidden agenda.

The beliefs and values of religious traditions can be interpreted as a basic starting point or repository of resources for young people's search for meaning, identity and community. There can be the hope that they might later embrace (and even enhance) the religious identity that an older generation believes to be of value for them, but what eventuates will be theirs to determine.

This interpretation is not a bland endorsement of the view that youth should be encouraged to feel free to piece together their own idiosyncratic religious identity according to their needs and interests, whether or not this has much congruence with orthodoxy in their faith tradition. However, it does acknowledge that in the interplay between individual and faith tradition there will inevitably be the exercise of personal freedom and a resultant distinctive, personal religious identity profile. The colourings of personal religious identity will be diverse; for some it will be strongly linked with religion; for others it will not.

5.6.3 Identity, conflict and violence in the Australian context and internationally

Despite the Cronulla racial tensions of late 2005, it remains difficult for Australians to comprehend fully the ramifications of ethnic violence and conflict in Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere, even though in recent years the spectre of terrorism has loomed ever closer to home. Since Australia has become increasingly multicultural, all of the ethnic and religious groups seen to be in conflict overseas are now represented here, and their various feelings of prejudice, oppression and hatred have

been brought with them. But somehow the new situation seems to have diffused the potential for ethnic violence though it does not deny the presence of racism in Australia, or the need to address it. (Apart from domestic disputes, most of the violence in the community is crime-related and not specifically ethnic or religious, even if it shows up more in some particular areas rather than others.)

Perhaps some contributing factors to the situation in Australia may be: people's wish to make a new life away from the divisive problems in their country of origin; the desire to embrace the peaceful elements of their ethnic cultures; to give others fair treatment in a land of new opportunity for all; and as far as the country is concerned, an egalitarian national spirit (at least as an ideal), and no long-term tradition of ethnic violence. (This view does not discount the history of violent treatment of Aboriginal Australians, which continued well into the 20th century.)

Domestic violence, especially the abuse of women and children, remains a problem in Australia. It is related to identity questions, especially to what some men accept as a part of masculinity. In some Aboriginal communities, the problem has reached crisis proportions; it is affected negatively by patriarchy and a community code of silence.

In the non-crime-related violence outside the domestic circle, racial and religious identities are often involved. When people act violently against others, they usually have some rationalisation in their mind, no matter how vague and fleeting. The *others* are perceived as free-loaders, foreigners, threats, enemies or even as un-Australian. Their perceived identity is negative and impersonal; it gives some justification for the ill feeling and aggressive action. For those who in other circumstances see violence as wrong, such a justification can precipitate their action. While not so much a problem in this country, terrorism and religious or ethnic identity-related killing remain global problems.

The more clearly others can be pictured as threats, the easier it is to do violence against them. When these pictures are built up as stereotypes that are socially reinforced, it is even easier for the individuals doing the violence – they can call up a ready-made justification; they do not have to think about it.⁷

Of the various options a community may consider in trying to address racial violence, one is the promotion of a better understanding of the links between identity and violence. It involves looking into the ways both community and individuals construct identity vis-à-vis 'others'; it includes clarifying history, questioning prejudices and stereotypes, and exploring new constructive, peaceful interpretations.

Another aspect that warrants analysis is the anatomy of violence itself. For example, it is worth considering why violence is inherently satisfying and why it can be pleasurable – and less tedious than negotiated compromises.

Also pertinent is the way in which film and television have provided value-embedded narratives that subtly shape thinking about the public acceptability of violence (cf. Chapter 15); at least it makes violence – especially in the 'action film' genre – an acceptable and popular diet for entertainment. Similarly, the widespread popularity of video and arcade games that are based on combat needs to be considered (9.2.15).

Alternatives to violence also need to be studied: how non-violent conflict resolution and anger reduction can be made to work. (A novel strategy was proposed by one student in an Arizona school. Students' essays explored ways in which the community might reduce violence. One pupil suggested that more should be taught about how to

be violent, and if it was as boring as most of their schooling, then it might put children off violence.)

5.6.4 Identity and terrorism

Terrorism is intimately related to identity. As intended, it creates fear and uncertainty in the minds of ordinary people because they know they are potential targets. The terrible, senseless things done to innocent people outrages the community; and, as interpreted by many politicians, terrorism is portrayed as evil striking out without reason or sanity. There is no justification for such inhumanity – no matter what the proffered reasons of the terrorist groups. However, there are problems in understanding its origins comprehensively because it is too readily understood only in terms of its inherent evil.

There are no simple or completely effective solutions to the problem of terrorism; and this includes the use of overwhelming military power and hyper-efficient security. In terms of the role of identity in terrorism, there are a number of issues that need more public clarification. Some of the key questions are:

- the historical origins of particular terrorist activity
- how the West in general, and the United States in particular, have come to be perceived by many in the Middle East as the ‘enemy of Islam’
- the role of religion in general, and the Islamic faith in particular, in relation to terrorism
- war, terror and terrorism: the role of nation-states and non-state actors.

To try to understand what has given rise to terrorism is not to condone it. Terrorism is ‘politically motivated violence that accepts no limits or constraints and makes no distinction between combatants and civilians’.⁸ But each terrorist action has some history of grievance behind it, and some purposes even if unrealistic. For example, the repression experienced by the Palestinians over the last fifty years, particularly since the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, makes their revolt against the Israeli government understandable, even if one cannot accept suicide bombing as a justifiable response. They have experienced their share of violence and misery. The possibility of halting the spiralling cycle of violence that engulfs both Israel and the Palestinians seems a dim hope. Peaceful negotiations, mutual respect and understanding may sound like hollow solutions – but ultimately, these are the only viable ones. Revenge and eradication through force are unlikely to be long-term solutions, and they probably exacerbate the problem.

The Chechen terrorism reached new heights in the atrocity in a Russian school building. But it too had historical roots: the horrendous historical treatment of the Chechens themselves. In 1944, most were exiled to camps in Siberia by Stalin as punishment for so-called Nazi sympathies; those who did not die returned in 1957. With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Chechen impetus for freedom from Russia gathered momentum, but was thwarted by the Russian invasion in 1995; in that and the later 1999 war, over 60#000 Chechens died and the capital Grosny was effectively razed by Russian bombing and shelling.

In Indonesia, the rise of terrorism is not just motivated by anti-Western feelings; state-orchestrated violence in Aceh, Papua, East Timor and elsewhere have also sowed seeds of dissent.

Similarly, with the cycle of violence in Northern Ireland that now seems to have ebbed, it was social and economic disadvantage that fuelled discontent, with divisions along sectarian religious lines being used to reinforce antagonisms.

The United States does not have an untainted history as far as meddling in the affairs of other states is concerned; its actions in supporting dictatorial regimes with poor records on human rights have become well known around the world. A sort of paranoia about communism taking over the world not only informed US involvement in the Vietnam War, but also motivated the clandestine support of other conflicts like the Iran–Iraq war and the Russian Afghan war, as well as the destabilisation of various South American governments that appeared to veer towards communism. Ironically, the United States supported the subversive action of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan during the Russian occupation.

The points being made here are not trying to lay blame, nor to justify causes, but to suggest that the problem of terrorism needs to be understood in terms of its historical complexity, and not just in the simple black-and-white terms proffered by the media. Problems are not likely to diminish until historical injustices and inequities are addressed. There is no simple solution.

What happened in South Africa warrants consideration. While the situation there still has many apparently insurmountable difficulties, there has been a relatively peaceful end to apartheid and a relatively smooth transition to a more representative government. While there is still much street and township violence, it remarkable that the political changes in the early 1990s did not result in violence with civil war proportions.

Nowadays, the words ‘Islamic’ and ‘terrorist’ are readily associated in the West. It is true that not all Muslims are terrorists; but it is equally true that most terrorists today are Muslims. Even though killing of the innocent is clearly contrary to the Qu’ran and Islamic law, terrorists have espoused Islam and Jihad as justifications for their activity. The words ‘suicide bombing’ are never used by the protagonists, but rather being ‘martyrs’ for the cause; the modern religious rationale for terror tactics arose from the action of an Iranian child ‘martyr’ during the Iran–Iraq war, and it developed further in the Palestinian conflict – as well as becoming prominent in the 9/11 and Bali attacks, and more recently in Iraq, which remains on the brink of civil war.

The Islamic religion has been pushed by terrorism to the forefront of a clash of civilisations, and religious meanings have been distorted in a fundamentalist way to bolster the cause and motivate those who would give up their lives to kill ordinary people who are identified as ‘enemies of Islam’. What has been lacking is a clear, unequivocal and widespread public condemnation of terror killing by Islamic religious leaders. While in different places they have spoken out, and while some have even decreed a fatwah against Muslims who murder innocent people, the general impression in Western countries is that terrorism is not strongly renounced by the Islamic faith.

The final point to be made here has to do with the words ‘terror’, ‘terrorism’ and ‘war’. ‘Terrorism’ is commonly used with reference to the action of political groups but not nation-states; the phrase ‘non-state actors’ is the term used in international law. This usage can give an impression that nation-states by definition do not engage in terrorism – they engage in more legitimate activity like war! Terrorism is the tactic

of non-state actors. But what is unfortunately missed is that war itself is one of the most extreme forms of terror. If human fear, suffering, maiming and death are the measures, then war cannot easily be justified as righteous while at the same time condemning the violence in terrorism. This interpretation is not a justification of terrorism, but a plea for a closer examination of the terror that is in war.

In all of the discussion in this section, the perceived identity of self and others runs through the dynamics of violence.

5.6.5 Identity relationships with the non-human world

What has been said above about identity, violence and human conflict needs to be put into the wider context of concern for human community. But even that is not enough. It needs to be extended so that individual and group identities are also referenced to the non-human world in its physical and biological aspects.

A traditional dualism (especially in Western cultures) separating human beings from the non-human world (earth, plants and animals) has been an influential component in the thinking that underpins the continued degradation of the environment. It sustains a mentality of dominance and exploitation. It also informs, or is utilised by, economic theory.

A more holistic understanding of human relationships with the non-human world is needed. The continuities between humans, other life-forms and the physical environment need more attention than the discontinuities. How religious traditions, the sciences and the humanities have (or have not) thought about this aspect of human identity deserves attention.

Any consideration of these questions needs to be realistic enough to recognise that 'getting the philosophy right' is important, but not an automatic solution to the problems that have complex economic and psychological components less amenable to change. For example, Eastern philosophy and religions have not promoted the dualism noted above; they have a long tradition of co-joining the human and non-human in the world. But, when it comes to economic gain, Eastern countries have been as adept as others in degrading the environment in the interest of economic gain.

In addition to looking at current spiritual and ecological perspectives on environmental stewardship, it will also be valuable to consider more fundamental issues that are emerging in discussions about relationships between philosophy, religion and the 'new physics' – the last mentioned being concerned with new scientific, cosmological understandings of the nature of matter and the universe.

The success of the Newtonian mechanical model at the macro level in science and industry in recent centuries has reinforced dualistic thinking about human beings and nature, as well as the mythology of an objective, positivist, infallible science. But since the revolution in physics dating from Einstein, Bohr and quantum theory, there has been a fundamental shift in scientific thinking about the nature of the universe. And now it is a question of the flow-on of this thought into the human sciences, philosophy and religion.

The sequence of change in thinking, beginning with atoms, has now proceeded through sub-atomic particles, waves, energy quanta, indeterminacy and complexity, and sub-quantal interactive self-regulating systems. Increasingly, the leading edge of scientific thought on nature uses language that resembles talk about meaning and

relationships – metaphor could be becoming as relevant an explanatory principle at sub-quantal levels as the old mechanical model is at the macro level. Similarly, at the other end of the spectrum, the astronomical level, scientific inquiry is pushing ever further into understanding of the origins, maintenance and ‘end’ of the universe.

While there is a relatively small number of people pursuing a better popular understanding of what is happening in the new physics, a considerable distance remains between this thinking and its relevance to the wider community. Nevertheless, efforts are required to help bridge the gap. For example, there is a need to appraise the claims of authors like Zohar that ‘there is a rich repository of language, metaphor and allusion in these new scientific ideas, as well as practical applications for understanding human nature and consciousness. Quantum physics in particular almost cries out for use as a more general model for a whole new kind of thinking about ourselves and our experience.’⁹ Books like *The Quantum Self* and *The Quantum Society*¹⁰ and the movie *What the Bleep Do We Know?* show some of the popular interest in these developments. It remains to be seen what implications, if any of significance, the behaviour and relationships of entities at sub-quantal levels will have for understanding human meanings, identities and relationships.

Another area that also warrants attention in relation to identity and meaning is biology, and the issues it raises about the nature of life, consciousness and evolution.

5.6.6 *Homo economicus*: The rise and rise of economic identity

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s were readily interpreted by some as ‘The West, and the United States especially, have won the cold war’. Also, the demise of communism in Russia was interpreted by some as a ‘canonisation’ of capitalism. Capitalism, in public rhetoric, is then associated with democracy, and this history provides a sort of global justification of economic rationalism – the principle that there must be ‘development’ and ‘improvement’, and that the ultimate values driving developments are economic ones. Competition, profit and fiscal efficiency seem to be regarded not just as economic principles, but as taken-for-granted ‘laws’ of human progress, making them appear beyond question. These concerns can override human values, and people can be regarded and used as means of production, or – in the polite organisational jargon – as human resources.

The evaluation of economic issues needs to take account of *human identity* – what it means to be human. The nature and purpose of humans need to figure more prominently.

While it is beyond our scope to explore issues in any detail, a cluster of economic questions that have identity implications are listed below.

- consumerism
- economic rationalism
- economic competition
- globalisation of markets
- market forces as ‘value-free’
- priority of shareholder profit in business
- free trade, tariffs and the development of a country’s industries

- growth of the economy
- casualisation of employment
- the human meaning of work and labour
- unemployment.

Some topics cut across a number of these questions: for example, the *death of country towns* – where free-ranging competitive market forces can result in the gradual decline and loss of viability of country towns, leaving a trail of social problems; and the *casualisation of employment* – where a so-called key principle of business efficiency can have many deleterious social and personal consequences for casual workers.

Even questions like *unemployment* have significant identity implications. The changing place of work in many Western countries affects personal identity and self-esteem. Traditionally, there has been a tendency to define the identity and worth of individuals in terms of their useful work. Personal and social stress inevitably flow from unemployment, but not just from the economic hardship it entails. A significant component is low self-esteem, which arises in part because individuals have become too strongly identified with their capacity for gainful employment; it affects men more than it does women.

Despite government rhetoric about the need for a more technologically skilled workforce, there remains a significant problem that has not been adequately addressed: the likely scenario that in technologically advanced countries the availability of full-time employment will drop to a consistently low level of perhaps 75 per cent or less of those seeking jobs, because less labour is needed to sustain the economy.

Whatever the economic response to the problem, it would seem that the community is faced with the task of rethinking the role and meaning of work in human identity. Education could be in the forefront of community efforts to develop new understandings. And not just for work – but new understandings of human meaning and purpose, standard of living and quality of life.

At a more global level, there is a need for awareness that changes in international markets can have significant and widespread human repercussions. For example, the idea of *free trade* is widely touted as necessarily good for every country, but it does not always imply *fair trade* because it will suit some economic interests more than others. If some countries and people suffer as a consequence, it tends to be dismissed as the ‘natural consequences of competition’, and competition is always presumed to be ‘good’. Take one example: trade restrictions with quota limits on clothing exported from various countries to the United States and European Union domestic markets protected the national industries to some extent and gave a wide range of countries access to those markets. It regulated a global industry of about \$490 billion annually. However, the free trade agreement for clothing concluded at the end of 2004. Markets like the United States and Europe could then contract the previously regulated purchasing spectrum of sixty countries down to say twenty, with no quota restrictions, and perhaps eventually to about ten, depending on where the cheapest products can be manufactured.¹¹ There is growing concern that China, which now has the capacity for volume production with such low labour costs that other countries would find it difficult to compete, could increase its market share from the current 16 per cent (2004) to 50 per cent. It would mean that millions of relatively poor workers in

countries like Bangladesh (with 1.8 million textile workers), Nepal, Burma, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Swaziland and others would be in danger of losing their regular livelihood.

The dominant economic rationalist identity affixed to the deregulation and globalisation of markets usually does not factor the human cost into the equation. The negative effects of such processes on employment in different countries, including increasing poverty and lower standards of living, tend to be accepted as a natural ‘collateral damage’ of ‘free markets’. ‘Competition’ and ‘survival of the fittest’ can be thought of as a sort of justification for such ‘economic progress’.

Economic questions like the above raise significant identity issues. As trade has become more planetary, more thought and responsibility need to go into regulation. So-called unlimited economic growth cannot be presumed to go on forever. Answers to the question ‘what people are for’ need to have a pre-eminent place in international commercial considerations; people should not be treated as if they were no more than human resources for economic growth. The issues are complex, and call for thinking that goes beyond personal, commercial and national identities to concerns about the global human community. What economic responsibility should richer nations take for the wellbeing of poorer countries? It involves more than providing humanitarian help in times of crisis. The cancellation of debt has helped but there is more to be done.

5.6.7 Relationships between media, the state and national identity

The influence of a sense of national identity on people’s self-understanding and self-expression will vary considerably from individual to individual. It can operate like a taken-for-granted identity background that provides a basic cultural context in which people live. It will have a different feeling and a different force in a country at particular times. It comes into play when individuals make comparisons with other national identities; it happens when people travel; when they advert to different ethnic and religious groups in their community; and it surfaces strongly during international sporting competitions. National identity can be a powerful influence on attitudes and behaviour (and hence on spirituality); as already noted, at times it has been used to fuel ethnic hatred, violence and war.

Some of the questions about national identity that need consideration:

- National identity is like a ‘cultural given’ that arises physically out of the geographical location of birth or ethnic group. But it is not physically genetic – it is cultural inheritance, constructed and maintained by social interaction, and therefore it should be open to analysis and evaluation.
- How much overt nationalism is appropriate in a healthy personal identity? How can it include acknowledgment of national origins, a sense of national belonging and community, while not being xenophobic and closed to social interaction with people of other nationalities?
- To what extent will the mass media, particularly film and television, with their global village capacity for communication, affect national identities?

An article by Shields (1996) proposed that the globalisation of media is pertinent to these questions.¹² He noted that the current struggle among giant media corporations for power and profit was being waged ‘on a planetary scale’. The small number of transnational media companies (such as Sony, AOL Time Warner, Disney and News Corporation) were manoeuvring to be able to deliver television and audiovisual

products across the globe's geographic and social space (China was like the last frontier of relatively unconquered territory). Shields labelled it as 'cultural imperialism at a new level'. In particular, it seemed to be spreading a worldwide 'Americanisation of culture'.

Could this lead to a homogenisation of world culture with consequent erosion of regional and national identities that are not perceived to be as relevant as they were formerly? Would the continued globalisation of communication markets affect national integration?

These questions seem to assume that a large public ingestion of international (Americanised) television will erode identity and reduce cultural diversity. It may do so in some respects; it may not in others. The comparisons people make through such international exposure, in spite of the cultural borrowings and homogenisation of some aspects, may well reinforce basic differences and therefore reinforce national identity.

The media-centric argument that national identities will be eroded seems to exaggerate television's social significance and social influence. Even though there is evidence of a growing world cultural imperialism in television, there is equal evidence of a growing world education through the same medium. The claim that television will weaken national identity does not seem to understand adequately the complex social forces that shape national identity and the wider national integration enterprise. National identity should not be thought of as just a non-contested natural fact; neither should it be considered exclusively as something that groups might construct to secure their position of dominance in their society; it has both natural and constructed aspects.

Because sources of differentiation exist within nation-states (for example religion, language, ethnicity), multiple collective identities or even other national identities will coexist cooperatively or subordinately, or perhaps antagonistically within the official national identity. The most serious threats to national identity usually come from within the country itself rather than from the outside. Also, waves of nationalist fervour, such as the neo-Nazi movement in Germany and white supremacist movements in the United States and elsewhere, need to be understood within the particular social and economic situations in which they take root. In these instances, nationalism is fuelled by widespread unemployment, poverty, social change and social inequalities. Such understanding does not diminish the problem, but it may be a starting point for addressing it.

On the other hand, if television helps towards even a mild softening of national distinctiveness and a greater openness to an international cultural perspective, then it will have achieved something for the wider sense of human community. Healthiness in national identities would seem to need a balance between international and local perspectives; just as there is a need to preserve genetic and species diversity in the animal world, the global human community needs to preserve national and ethnic cultural heritages – as well as religious heritages – in ways that maintain social harmony.

Notes

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- 1 K Marx, *The German ideology*, quoted in N Postman 1993, *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology*, p. 21.
 - 2 JM Hull 1994, Religionism and religious education. Paper presented at the International Conference on Religion and Conflict, Armagh, Ireland.
 - 3 A Quart 2003, *Branded: The buying and selling of teenagers*, p. 8.
 - 4 A de Botton 2004, *Status anxiety*, p. 15.
 - 5 *ibid.*, p. 16.
 - 6 S Price 2004, Christianity is fine, but please don't mention the church.
 - 7 Two relevant points: 1. The ambivalence that US soldiers had about the 'identity' of the enemy in the Vietnam War, and the ambivalent feelings in the community about the morality of US involvement were not insignificant factors in the postwar psychological traumas of some servicemen. 2. Military (and paramilitary) uniforms facilitate violence because they give the wearer anonymity and distance from the normal moral restrictions that operate at community level. They may feel that they are doing this as part of an institutional action; they are not doing it personally; they were 'obeying orders'.
 - 8 S Burchill 2004, What exactly are we witnessing?
 - 9 D Zohar & I Marshall 1993, *The quantum society: Mind, physics and a new social order*, p. xii.
 - 10 D Zohar 1990, *The quantum self: A revolutionary view of human nature and consciousness rooted in the new physics*.
 - 11 A Adiga et al. 2004, Hanging by a thread: Textile factories throughout Asia face extinction as a long-standing global trade pact is set to expire.
 - 12 P Shields 1996, State, national identity and media.