The aim of this chapter is to say something about the changing relationship between religion and various forms of personal, political and social identity during the English Reformation of the sixteenth century. We should recognize at the outset that ‘identity’ is a slippery and difficult concept to catch hold of, both philosophically and historically. Answering the question ‘who am I?’ involves navigating a dense web of social and cultural interactions, as well as recognizing the existence of internal and psychological processes that are simply inaccessible to the historian, or indeed to any outside agent. Identities are more than merely psychological conditions or categories, and nor are they simply the compound of a series of believed propositions, or the summation of an individual’s stand on a series of social, moral and metaphysical issues. No more are they stable, fixed, or immutable. It would be trite merely to say that identities are socially constructed – for what in human life is not? But they are certainly socially negotiated, in the sense that the identity of a self can only be found in forms of conscious engagement with a range of outside ‘others’ – ideas, individuals, institutions. It follows from this, that identities are not just assumed or taken on; they are also, to some extent at least, ascribed, bestowed by others. And furthermore, to think of identity solely or even primarily in terms of individuality or personal autonomy may be something of a category error. As Charles Taylor has observed, ‘the full definition of someone’s identity... involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community’.

What then is the relationship between the Reformation and identity? The subject presents a number of inviting paths of exploration which it is not the intention to follow in this chapter. One is to explore the supposed implications of the theological debates and spiritual insights of the Reformation itself. There is a well-established theory which holds that Protestantism’s rejection of clerical mediation, its promotion of an intense personal relationship with Christ, and its insistence on justification by faith alone, all led towards interiority and individualism; that the origins of the modern sense of self are to be

1 Perhaps the seminal work here is Taylor 1989. I have also found helpful remarks in Hindmarsh 2005, pp. 8–11.

2 Taylor 1989, p. 36.
found, as it were, in Luther’s *Turmerlebnis*. Yet this is an idea, assuming he could have grasped it, that would have undoubtedly horrified the reformer himself, one of whose principal concerns was the abnegation of any sense of individual self-worth under the eye of God. In any case, there is much evidence, underlined by modern research, that Protestant societies could be quite as corporately minded as their late medieval precursors. And a long tradition of affective prayer and mystical contemplation, culminating in the experiences of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, or in the Spiritual Exercises of Loyola, makes short work of the idea that Catholicism was in any way inimical to individual introspection. Max Weber’s famous and much discussed thesis, that predestinarian theology promoted among its adherents a spiritual self-evaluation with significant social and economic consequences, is a road also not to be travelled on this occasion.

This chapter will, however, engage more directly with a currently key paradigm in Reformation studies. Taylor’s ‘defining community’, in an early modern context, could be the guild, village or commune. But it might also take the form of the Church or the nation, entities which are often thought to have been coming into increasingly close alignment in most European states in the early modern period. Here we encounter the influential ‘confessionalization thesis’, first articulated by Heinz Schilling and Wolfgang Reinhard in a German context and subsequently reformulated for a variety of other European societies.

The concept of confessionalization has an interestingly dual aspect in any consideration of the relationship between religion and identity in the early modern period. On the one hand, it supposes the achievement of a sense of greater self-awareness on the part of religious worshippers within the state, as people became increasingly conscious of themselves – in a confessional sense – as Lutherans, Roman Catholics or Reformed. By the later sixteenth century, as Diarmaid MacCulloch has neatly put it, ordinary people were starting to ‘own the religious labels’. At the same time, however, a key aspect of confessionalization, in both Protestant and Catholic settings, was the more systematic and intense promotion of religious and moral control: the external imposition, and receptive internalization, of forms of social discipline instrumental in the creation of loyal and obedient subjects. Here is an apparently

---

3 Bossy 1998; Burnett 2011; Maltby 1998.
4 Weber 1930.
6 MacCulloch 2003, p. 338.
7 Hsia 1989.