One of the central questions in the current debate on identity is whether the self is unique or a construct of sociocultural influences. Perhaps the term ‘or’ in this question is misleading: we should rather be concerned with the tension between uniqueness and sociocultural influences as both fundamental aspects of a person’s identity. It is this tension we want to address in our article. How can we think of the self as a relational phenomenon and yet allow for the feeling of distinctiveness that characterizes a sense of personal identity? We will argue that it is necessary to take the uniqueness of the self into account in developing the concepts of spiritual and religious identity.

Recent views in social psychology that can be grouped under the name social constructionism, stress the importance of sociocultural influences in identity formation, which is preferably seen as a process of self-construction. Important though the social constructionist criticism of mainstream psychological identity concepts is, one may wonder whether justice is done to the aforementioned tension. In his book The Saturated Self, K.J. Gergen (1991) discards the notions of uniqueness and distinctiveness altogether. According to Gergen one’s identity is continuously changing in the context of ever-changing relationships. He coins the term ‘multiphrenia’ for a new pattern of self-consciousness: “splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments” (p. 74). Postmodern man can be described as a restless nomad, torn between the diverging claims of the ‘invisible guests’ that populate his self with their abundance of expectations, values and beliefs. “The individual slowly disappears into the greater dance of communal life” (p. 110). This metaphor is not without charm, but is it necessary to think in terms of either/or about individuality and communal life? Will postmodern man inevitably move in this direction? Furthermore, a problematic aspect in Gergen’s view is the aspect of embodiment. It does not seem to do justice to the experience of being this body as distinguished from other bodies.
It is interesting to confront Gergen’s social constructionist view with those developed in moral psychology and moral philosophy, in which more attention is paid to the role of uniqueness alongside sociocultural influences. In their book *Identity, Character, and Morality*, the philosophers O.J. Flanagan and A. Oksenberg Rorty state that ethical reflection asks for a “robust conception of identity”. With this concept they refer to what they call “firm, self-respecting, morality-sensitive identities” that, however, have social bases and are developed in social practices. “It is this more robust sense of identity that we seek to capture when we aim at self-understanding, when we attempt to engage and comprehend others, and when we make judgments about character, worth, and responsibility” (p. 3). Next to social practices, Flanagan and Oksenberg Rorty look at the bodily aspects of identity and how these limit processes of self-construction. “The biological basis and ramifications of temperamental traits raises the question of the extent to which character can be chosen or self-constructed” (p. 5). As Flanagan phrases it, “We are neither creators nor sole guardians of our identities” (p. 44).

In an interesting way, Flanagan and other philosophers like S.E. Cuypers, R.A. Putnam and Ch. Taylor make a connection between identity and ‘care’. A ‘robust self’ is discussed by Flanagan in terms of a “set of cares and identifications” (p. 49). People undergoing an identity crisis are in a certain sense ‘care-less’. Identity is built up from the plans, projects and commitments according to which the individual lives, though the person need not be able to articulate these leading commitments. From a social constructionist point of view, one may ask whether people still have leading commitments, or rather are torn between divergent commitments and make pragmatic choices. It is important to note here that Flanagan does not limit commitment to elevated, everlasting goals: “Identity in the first instance requires that there be something or someone – baseball, sophistication, concern for the fate of grass or one’s teammates – with which one strongly identifies” (p. 55). According to Putnam, goals, projects and ideals give form and coherence to periods of a life. She seems to allow for changes in these commitments without giving up the idea of their contribution to identity formation.

An important contribution to understanding the tension between personal uniqueness and sociocultural influences is made by Cuypers and Taylor, who link the cares and commitments of people, and therewith their identities, to sensitivity. We care for something to which we are introduced