CHAPTER THREE

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

Johannes A. van der Ven

SUMMARY

This chapter seeks to answer two questions: what does the religious identity of individuals and communities entail, and how can we research it? The concept of religious identity entails two terms: religion and identity. In this chapter religion refers to individuals and communities dealing with the dialectical relation between autonomy and contingency, especially in existentially meaningful situations and experiences, in the perspective of transcendence. Identity refers to the dialectic relation between ‘same’ and ‘other’ (Aristotle 1054a30–1059a14). ‘Same’ in religious identity is expressed in permanence in time, and ‘other’ in the relation between identity and alterity. Finally, I analyse the relation in comparative research on religious identity between, on the one hand, two methods, qualitative and quantitative, and, on the other hand, two perspectives, insider and outsider.

INTRODUCTION

The novel Snow by Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk is set in the city of Kars in a remote corner of north-eastern Anatolia, which has been dominated alternately by Greeks, Turks, Kurds, Armenians, Georgians and Russians. In our own day it has seen a struggle between Islamists and Kemalists, and between activists, traitors, profiteers, fellow travellers and victims. At the end the writer, who plans to record all these intricacies in a book, is told by the receptionist of the hotel of the same name, Snow: “If you write a book set in Kars and put me in it, I’d like to tell your readers not to believe anything you say about me, anything you say about any of us. No one could understand us from so far away” (2005: 435). The quotation epitomises the no less complex task facing a scientific researcher who tries to compare the religious identities of individuals and communities ‘from so far away’.
In this section I discuss the following themes in identity as permanence in time. The first is that permanence of identity in time can be described in terms of the dialectic between sameness and self, which differ in structure. Even though identity may appear to be homogeneous, it is characterised by multiplicity and hybridity and may comprise any number of aspects. Like all forms of identity, religious identity is marked by the dialectic of ascription and achievement. But is achieved identity a free choice based on personal intentionality, or is it imposed by extraneous structural factors? And finally, is that choice mediated by religious representations (ideological identity), religious rites (ritual identity), religious institutions (institutional identity) or by some or all of these?

Sameness and self

A hallmark of identity, whether individual or communal, is that it remains the same over time. It survives the ‘ravages of time’. But the fact that it is not affected by time does not make it an invariable constant. Because of temporal change identity undergoes necessary transformation, evidenced by individual human development. That does not imply that it changes its form while the essence remains untouched. Such essentialism should make way for the following argument. Just as individuals or communities used to relate to historical circumstances in a given era (T1), so they relate, analogously, to current historical circumstances (T2). Thus permanence of identity lies in continuity of relations to time, for example, T1 and T2.

This entails an important insight. Identity does not precede time, it is not above or buried in the depths of time, but is embodied in time. It is not a reified process independent of its carriers, be they individuals or communities. It is actualised in the interaction between these carriers and the surrounding culture in time. It is grounded in the way individuals and communities, in interaction with culture, see themselves as ‘the same’ in varying circumstances throughout history up to the present. That determines its hermeneutic character (cf. Van der Ven, 2005: 120–123).

That tells us something about the past and the present, but what about the future? Permanence in the past and the present can be reconstructed hermeneutically after the event. But reconstructing future permanence