NARCISSISM AND MOTIVATION FOR THE PASTORATE

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Abstract

This article describes an empirical study of the relationship between narcissism and motivation for the pastorate. Narcissism has been a key concept in the psychology of personality in recent decades, in an age in which personal life has acquired central status. Motivation is a vital concept in the study of how pastors function. Narcissism may explain part of the dynamics behind motivation for the pastorate. Several types of motivation for the pastorate and dimensions of narcissism are distinguished. In the case of motivation for the pastorate, these are a Christian way of life, anthropocentric altruism, anthropocentric egoism, and theocentric egoism, and in the case of narcissism, these are centripetal narcissism, centrifugal narcissism, isolation, and self-satisfaction. The meaning of the relationship between motivation for the pastorate and narcissism for stress and burnout is discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pastor Janssen recently abandoned the pastorate – he was completely worn out. Talks with a counsellor revealed that he expected too much of his work. His personality played a part in this: he craved admiration. Pastor Brands also gave up the ministry, but in his case other personality factors were involved: he constantly sought endorsement, and the slightest criticism of his way of working was enough to upset him.

In both cases it was the pastors’ unrealistically high expectations that caused them to burn out. Such expectations are common among pastors (Grosch & Olsen, 2000; Hall, 1997). Those who try to do the impossible (or nigh-impossible) are at great risk of disappointment, loss of self-confidence, stress, burnout and psychosocial problems (Evers & Tomic, 2003; Olsen & Grosch, 1991). Sometimes people even abandon the pastorate, for it has not given them what they expected of it.

In addition, both pastors were preoccupied with themselves: one sought constant admiration, and the other constant endorsement. It can also be said that narcissistic issues were involved in both cases. Narcissism is a much-used term and a well-chosen metaphor for describing the Western lifestyle in recent decades. The constant self-reflection that the term expresses is perfectly in keeping with an individualistic culture. More specifically, this culture can be described as expressive-individualistic, a term coined by the
sociologist Robert Bellah (1996). In such a culture, people are faced with the task of building up an existence of their own without being able to rely on predefined views of what makes life worth living. Everyone is expected to steer their own course and construct such views by themselves. Important values in this kind of individualism are (1) autonomy, freedom and self-determination, (2) originality and uniqueness and (3) self-fulfilment. These values, which are often also formulated as imperatives, call for constant reflection on one’s own behaviour and hence do much to create a narcissistic habitus.

Although people with an outspoken narcissistic habitus are very self-centred, narcissism has major implications for their relationships with others. This is reflected in their often unrealistic expectations of other people. There is a wish to receive admiration and constant endorsement from others, even when nothing has been done to warrant this (Kohut, 1971; Kernberg, 1986). People with strongly narcissistic traits expect too much of others, and hence there is also a relationship between narcissism and the adverse consequences of unrealistic expectations (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; Robins & Beer, 2001). Narcissistic desires generate unrealistic expectations, which in turn make people susceptible to disappointment, stress, burnout and so on.

Expectations are an integral part of human motivation. Questions such as ‘what does one consider important and how much of this does one expect to achieve through one’s occupation?’ touch on people’s motivations for a particular occupation. This is most specifically expressed in what is known as expectation theory (Weiner, 1992). Knowledge of motives, and hence of expectations, provides a good deal of insight into behaviour in work situations, such as choice of occupation, satisfaction and disappointment, perseverance and burnout (Geen, 1995). Since expectations are part of a person’s motivation, there is also a relationship between narcissism and motivation – for narcissism can affect a person’s expectations, which in turn are a key component of motivation.

This brings me to my research question: what is the relationship between narcissism among pastors and their motivation for the pastorate? In answering this question I intend to make a contribution to the study of people’s motives for taking up the pastorate. This may provide greater insight into the relationship between motivation and such important themes as satisfaction with and commitment to the pastorate, as well as perseverance and burnout among pastors.

The structure of this article is as follows. I will start by looking at the concepts of motivation and narcissism, ending with a section on the rela-