The different faces of empathy

SUMMARY

In the research reported in this paper, the psychological dynamics of pastoral identity are explored by relating different dimensions of professional identity to a more general and personal orientation towards others: empathy. Significant differences were found between catholic pastors and protestant ministers. The catholic pastoral ministry is cognitively oriented, separating personal involvement from professional understanding and commitment. The Protestant pastoral ministry is affectively oriented, but expressing a rather ambiguous social involvement. These differences are explained in terms of differences in theology and career motivation.

1. Introduction

When pastors answer questions about their pastoral identity — answers to the question: Who am I as a pastor?, they tend to answer in terms of particular role models. Therefore it cannot be ruled out that they will try to present a picture of themselves which corresponds more to an ideal of the pastorate as they prefer it, than to the reality they experience in everyday life. These identity-providing role models are considered to predict the way pastors perform their clerical duties. In fact, however, it may be more realistic to analyse identity as a result of performance: a pastor is a teacher when preaching a sermon, and a counselor during confession. As a result of these complications — ideal vs actual, effect vs cause — pastoral identity, as perhaps any identity concept (Van der Werff, 1985), is surrounded by a certain degree of ambiguity. In this paper the psychological dynamics of pastoral identity will be explored and related to the way the pastor is open and empathic to the experiences of other people. The reason for this analysis may be found in the rather basic understanding governing most therapeutic relationships, that one can only be open to others if there is openness towards oneself (cf. Kruyne, 1977; Mill, 1984).
1.1 Identity and performance

The pastoral identity as measured by the pattern of structured answers to the question: Who am I as a pastor?, might then contain some of the ambiguity inherent in the contextual nature of pastoral performance. Although pastors may prefer the priestly role, or the prophetic one, or the pastoral one, the identity they express through their performance is primarily dependent on the contextual requirements of the situation and the task at hand. As such, pastoral identity is not to be conceptualized as relating to a choice between mutually exclusive monolithic ideal types, but as referring to a specific position within a multidimensional ‘pastoral space’. Such a position is at best a compromise of personal preferences and social expectations with respect to the rather complex pattern of clerical activities to be performed and pastoral relations to be developed and maintained by a particular pastor. The totality of all such possible relations and activities, pastoral performances in general, comprises the whole of that ‘pastoral space’.

The pastoral space representing pastoral performances is structured by at least three dimensions: cognition, affect and behaviour (cf. Kee, 1992). They represent different modes of intervention and communication for the pastor to be used in bringing about change, further growth and stimulating development in the cure and care of souls (cf. Van Knippenberg & Nauta, 1994). The more cognitive dimension is related to the pastoral role of teacher and understands change or conversion as renovation by returning to the continuity of the Christian tradition. The affective dimension is related to the pastoral role of counsellor and understands change or conversion primarily as innovation by introspection. On this dimension communication is oriented towards the exploration of human experience, the representation and symbolization of feelings of misery and anguish, of joy and happiness. The third dimension is a behavioural one. This dimension is related to the pastoral role model of prophet or clown. Change is brought forward by the unexpected confrontation with a strikingly different way of life, which illuminates the meaninglessness of what is considered to be the convential and socially accepted thing to do. Saul’s meeting with Ananias from Damascus is exemplary for the kind of behaviour intended. Saul, blindly pursuing those who are ‘of that way’, blazng hate, is welcomed by Ananias who greets him as ‘Brother’ and gives him his blessing (Acts 9:1-19a). Ananias exemplifies the role model of the pastor as clown who exhibits a transformational form of leadership (Bass, 1985; Nauta, 1989). On this third dimension structuring the pastoral space, change or conversion is understood as transformation by reversal.

In the literature on pastoral identity each of these different dimensions is discussed in terms of role models, ‘pastoral types’, or identity patterns. The cognitive teacher role e.g. is discussed by Thurneysen (1968) and Adams (1977).