

Research Programme Title

Moving Identities: Religious Identity Formations in Global Spaces, Past and Present

Key words / phrases:

Religion, Identity, Globalisation, Migration, Resilience, Sustainability

Abstract

Today's world is characterized by the constant flow of people, ideas, cultural values, and money. Although each historical epoch has its peculiarities, these processes are by no means unique to modern-day Western societies. Throughout history and across the globe, cultural and religious traditions have interacted and often clashed, energized by the processes of globalisation, migration, human mobility, and economic disparity. How is it possible to develop a Christian (or any other religious) identity in a world that is constantly on the move and that is characterized by such global fluidity? Religious identities are also affected by the ecological crisis in a variety of ways. In particular, the anthropocentric worldview of Western Christianity is fundamentally called into question. The research programme, Moving Identities, employs a long-term perspective to address the complexities of religious identity formation in a globalizing and ecologically challenged world. Participants of the programme from various disciplinary fields of theology will search for answers to the central research question: How are religious identities formed in both past and present intercultural, globalised societies, and how can (understanding) these processes inform and shape the pursuit of a resilient and sustainable world?

Introduction

In its research programmes, the PThU strives to strengthen the links between academic theology, church communities, and society. The Moving Identities Programme starts from the conviction that theology, in its own particular way, can and should contribute to the analysis of pressing societal issues and to the search for solutions. The research team of the Moving Identities programme is characterized by its diverse inter-disciplinary and intra-disciplinary composition. The team includes scholars in theology and in religious studies, some of them conducting more historical research while others focus on contemporary research. The members are of different age groups, genders, and religious affiliations, and share a willingness and openness to critical academic, intercultural, and societal dialogue.

Our world is an increasingly complex one. Global networks of communication, transaction, production, and consumption define our economies, our cultures, and our relations. They influence the way we see and experience ourselves and others. They affect our sense of belonging and the values we live by. People from all over the world are becoming closer than ever before with both positive results, as seen through digital technology, global networking that fosters scientific progress, global attempts at fighting poverty and life-threatening diseases

such as HIV Aids and malaria, but also with more ambiguous results such as forced (labour) migration, mass tourism, and a virus pandemic. Yet this continuous confrontation with 'others' does not simply and harmoniously generate a more common global identity. More often than not it leads to 'othering' instead of an ethos of 'anothering' (Kosuke Koyama).¹ This confrontation with others challenges traditional, deeply engrained modes of belonging and identity, and creates a sense of uncertainty. People find themselves challenged by the tension between being connected and being rooted (Manuel Castells).²

The global threat of climate change and the depletion of natural resources also influence how people experience the complexity of today's world. The awareness of the planetary crisis calls into question dominant cultural patterns of relating to the more-than-human nature. Climate change, the loss of biodiversity, drought, flooding, and threats to food security are not merely causative factors in actual migration waves, but are in themselves endangering the resilience of societies.

Religion plays a role in all of these dynamics. It has the potential to unify people across differences by providing the grand narratives, values, axiomatic beliefs, and meaningful practices people rely on in their lives, , but it can also lead to conflict and seriously aggravate existing conflicts. Religion is a primary factor in the self-understanding and identity formation of both individuals and groups. In a society in transformation, such as contemporary Europe, people experience the pressure on their social, regional, national, cultural, and religious identities through the realities of globalisation, migration, and the ecological crisis. People apply strategies to help navigate the pressure on their identities. Research shows that in the given context of the Netherlands, many individuals are able to find adaptive strategies that enable them to harmonise their religious identity with the other layers of identity that are shifting. However, the political debate in the Netherlands and Europe, has also led to fierce polarisation on issues of migration, Islam, racism, anti-Semitism, climate change, sexuality, and gender, amongst others. Appeals to Christian religious values, traditions, and attitudes are an intrinsic part of the polarized discourses. One might even say that polarisation is not only a trigger for, but is also a major player in, the new formations of Christian (and other complex religious) identities in a globalized, postcolonial world.

In dealing with these developments we are indissolubly connected to, and can learn a lot from understanding, processes that took place in the global spaces of former times (e.g. when Israelite/Jewish and Christian identities developed in the context of ancient multi-religious empires, or when major shifts of Christian identity occurred in Europe during the emergence of modernity). Thus, in the Moving Identities research programme we consider it necessary to critically reflect on the highly complex dynamics of religious identity formation, and to pay attention to the societal ramifications of those dynamics, by using *a long-term perspective*. The sources, beliefs, and practices of religious communities and individuals are under critical reflection since identity formation has to do with all three fields. On the one hand, not everything that poses itself as 'Christian' can be justified by the inspirational sources, guiding beliefs, or orientating practices of Christian faith in the past or the present. On the other hand, we cannot take a fixed 'Christian identity,' given as an ahistorical norm, as our point of

¹ Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974).

² Castells, Manuel, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. 1* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

departure. Rather, it is our theological assumption, that what is given in Jesus Christ and 'makes' our Christian identity needs to be discovered, interpreted, imagined, articulated, and embodied time and again in ever-changing contexts.

By adopting this approach we affirm the 'Protestant principle' as formulated by Paul Tillich.³ The 'Protestant principle' argues that we must challenge any religious or cultural representation that acts as though it owns the privileged place of God's presence and authority. As conceptualized by Tillich, the Protestant Principle emerges from an understanding of justification by grace and through faith. It can be used simultaneously as a critical and a creative methodological tool, which:

- dissolves and prohibits any form of dichotomy, e.g., that of liberalism or orthodoxy (diversity of voices);
- sees all religious identity formation as embedded in larger cultural and historical processes (complexity);
- acknowledges that religions, Christianity as well as all other religious traditions, are involved in shaping the social, cultural, and political structures of humanity for better or for worse (historical processes);
- requires rigorous study of the holy scriptures and religious texts throughout times and spaces (sources);
- in its systematic theological dimension is a continuous search for defining the New Being (moving identities) against idolatry and ideologies (beliefs);
- compels theologians to critically examine Christian practices in all times and places (practices).

The general task will be to investigate the formation of complex religious identities in both the past and the present, and to study the societal ramifications of the processes involved.

Working from a wide *variety of time periods and religious and theological traditions*, from ancient Israel and the Roman Empire to modernity and the present day, we will attempt to develop a long-term perspective on the issue of identity formation in intercultural and ecologically challenged societies. Given our main expertise, we will predominantly, though not exclusively, research the sources, beliefs, and practices of Jewish and Christian religious identities, their historical backgrounds, and current interpretations. This will then enable us to formulate conditions for possible future religious expressions that may further the good life for all, including the non-human nature

Working in a *wide variety of spaces*, we interact with, and are challenged by, postcolonial discourses in other parts of the world (e.g. Africa, post-Soviet Eastern Europe, Indonesia, and Latin-America), and the different sources, beliefs, and practices that constitute Christian communal identities in those regions.

Working with a *wide variety of concepts, methods, and theories* we intend to position ourselves in, and contribute to, broader academic discourses on identity formation and on the principles needed to build a resilient and sustainable society from our specific field of expertise.

³ Paul Tillich, "The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation," in *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). The article was originally published in 1931.

Research purposes

Our purposes are fivefold:

First, we want to achieve more clarity on the factors involved in the formation of complex religious identities in both the past and the present.

Increases in mobility are one such factor. These increases lead to the emergence of global networks in which, amongst other things, knowledge, cultural values, and practices are transmitted and exchanged. We will study the effects of mobility and migration, both in contemporary forms of Christianity and in the ancient world. Currently, the degree to which Jews, Christians, and adherents of other religions in antiquity participated in global networks and how that involvement sheds light on their developing belief systems is still under-researched. We will also investigate how increases in mobility facilitates the rapid spread of ideas, values, practices, and discourses, and the appropriation of these in highly variegated contexts, both in ecclesial contexts in Europe and across the world. We will address the material basis of the digital infrastructure, means of transport, and communication which lead to the fabrication of hybrid Christian identities all over the world.

Second, we will seek to develop new methods, concepts, and theoretical models of complex identity formation in intercultural and ecologically challenged contexts and will seek to modify existing ones.

Taking the multidisciplinary character of our research programme as a starting point, we will offer a critical reflection on the methods, concepts, and theoretical approaches that have previously been applied to the study of identity formation in intercultural societies. If necessary, we will also seek to develop new approaches. Postcolonial theories, globalisation theories, network analysis, and the concept of hybridity each have their strengths and weaknesses. For example, postcolonial theories have been criticised for their binary take on 'coloniser' and 'colonised', whereas globalisation theories have been blamed for overlooking the role of power structures and (institutionalized) violence in the processes of identity formation.

The advantages and drawbacks of these different approaches often depend on the subjects they are used to investigate. We will therefore apply these models to specific cases. The research on post-colonialism in Amsterdam-East, and on concepts of the 'divine' and 'Christianisation' in the study of emerging Christianity in Europe may serve as examples here.

Theoretically heterogeneous models such as World Christianity Approach, Dialogical Self Theory, 'global mélange', and geographies of sexuality will be further developed and refined in the programme.

The interdisciplinary make-up of our group will offer reflections and contributions to theory building and methodology that move beyond the scope of studies that concentrate on one disciplinary field, one sort of materials, and one time period.

Third, our purpose is to develop a longue durée perspective on religious identity formation in multicultural spaces and on the societal ramifications of those processes.

This stands out as a unique challenge for this programme. Postcolonial theories have informed many studies on ancient civilisations such as the Roman Empire and its inhabitants. However, only rarely is the application of these theories to the ancient world accompanied by the reverse move: the question of what the ancient evidence might teach modern-day postcolonial thinkers. By utilising researchers working on a wide variety of time periods and religious and theological traditions, our group seems ideally qualified to develop a long-term perspective on issues of identity formation in multicultural societies and to foster creative ways of theologising on processes of identity formation and their societal impact.

Fourth, our purpose is to contribute to the wider field of identity and resilience studies from a theological, historical, and religious studies perspective.

The fifth purpose is to come to conclusions regarding the societal repercussions of certain forms of (communal and individual) religious identities in the past and the present and to make this knowledge accessible to faith communities and the general public.

Main research question

How are religious identities formed in both past and present intercultural, globalised societies, and how can (understanding) these processes inform and shape the pursuit of a resilient and sustainable world?

General sub questions

What were the dynamics and character of Jewish and Christian identity formation in complex intercultural contexts in the past (e.g. Jewish and early Christian identity formation in the Greco-Roman world, emerging Christianity in Europe)? What were the societal impacts of those processes of identity formation?

To what extent are the dynamics of Christian identity formation in today's societies influenced by a colonial and/or colonised past, by global processes, and by ecological threats? What are the societal and ecological ramifications of those processes of identity formation?

How do/did people (communities and individuals) negotiate their social, cultural, ethnic, national, sexual, and gender identities in conformance or in tension with their religious identities in the past and the present? What were/are the individual and societal ramifications of those negotiations?

What concordances and differences can be observed when comparing religious identity formation processes, and their societal ramifications, in globalised worlds of the past and present, cross-culturally, or across different streams and denominations of the Jewish and Christian traditions?

What can we gain through the combination of different methodological approaches to analyse identity formation processes such as empirical research, textual analysis and historical reconstruction, archaeological research, ritual studies, and methods of data analysis developed in the field of digital humanities etc.?

Which overarching concepts and theories are most helpful for providing a common framework for the research focus?

Based on our findings of the dynamics of Christian identity formation in the past and present, and on their diverse societal ramifications, can we suggest a theological approach for understanding and facilitating processes of Christian identity formation that is able to make a distinctive contribution to a resilient society and a just, sustainable world?