Bounding, Relating, Mixing

Identity Formation at a Christian school

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This essay is about identity. To be more precise, it concerns the formation of identity at a Christian school for higher vocational education in the Netherlands. As part of the more general process of "depillarization" of Dutch society, the school is struggling with the problem of redefining its Christian identity. In this piece I want to interpret the local process of identity-formation at the school from the point of view of three theoretical notions taken from actor-network theory: the notions of (1) "region," (2) "network," and (3) "fluid" (see Mol and Law 1994). Each of these three notions offers a different perspective on the process and the outcomes of redefining Christian identity. That is, each concept gives a different understanding, of the identity formation process, provides a different *locus* for it, and leads to a different description of the process. In showing this I will make use of semiotic analyses of actions, statements, fragments of text, and physical objects that I gathered as data from the school (Vermeulen 2001).

The school

In the city of Zwolle, situated in one of the northern provinces of the Netherlands, stands the country's biggest protestant-Christian institution for higher vocational education (see Vermeulen 2001). It has around 10,000 students and over 900 employees. The school comprises six faculties: Economics, Journalism, Social Work, Organizational Studies, Education, and Technology. These faculties were formerly autonomous organizations of Protestant denomination, but merged into one institution in 1987 (with the exception, however, of the technical faculty which joined the school in 1996 but was not of Christian denomination). The campus is situated next to a relatively new residential area. Entering the campus by foot or bicycle, alongside the students, teachers and other employees of the school, it might not be obvious to a newcomer where the main entrance of the school is. Although all of the buildings are connected, there are ten of them. Most striking is the difference between the original buildings, and the newer buildings built in 1993. One of the differences is that the older buildings are primarily used for regular educational activities while central management and administration use the newer ones. The differences between the buildings are the main cause of confusion as to where the main entrance of the school is. And linked to that is the question of which is the central building of the school, and what can be regarded as the insti- tution's central activities.

The name of school is attached to the wall next to the entrance: *Windesheim.* The name refers to an Augustine monastery that was located to the south of Zwolle and was founded in 1387 by members of a movement under the leadership of Gerard Groot, (cf. Broderick 1976). Holes and plugs in the wall above the name "Windesheim" attest to the moment in 1997 when the words *"christelijk"* (Christian) and *"hogeschool* (school) were taken down from the wall. The removal of the word "Christian" reveal: something about how this school has chosen to deal with, or to redefine, its (Christian identity. The question, however, is: how can this action be interpreted? Does it reveal a disintegration of Christian values, within this institution or even within Dutch society as a whole? There are voices that would confirm this (Sap et al. 1997). Is it a way of expressing that the school "has become accessible to non-Christian students? Or was it simply an aesthetic purpose that was behind the action? Whatever its significance, what I noticed during my research was that although the removal of the words was interpreted in various ways both by members of the school and by myself, it nevertheless provoked discussion about the Christian identity of the school. As such, the action functioned as a sign, as part of meaning-giving, semiotic processes.

Meaning-giving processes, such as this example, need to be contextualized. (Christian) identity is considered as a relational phenomenon. This means that identity is not defined in terms of an invariable essence, but in terms of its relations with other social phenomena and processes. Identity is indexical in that its relations with other things in a local context define it (see Hall 1996; Hanks 1996:47). Because identity is the outcome or effect of relational processes (see Gergen, 1991; Michael, 1996), it cannot be located other than via other "things" that stand in same sort of semiotic relation to it. These "things" (that function as signs) can be anything: words, actions, people, objects. Thus, to understand identity in the context of the Christian school means trying to find what "other things" are relevant, what kind of indexical relation these "things" have to identity, and where these are located. The answers to these questions about relevance, relation, and location are, of course, highly dependent on the way these issues are framed or contextualized. Again, meaning-giving processes need to be framed or "contextualized." Mol and Law (1994) argue that this framing can be done spatially, in different ways, through a regional approach, as a network, or as a fluid.

They argue that framing is based on the performance of spatial presuppositions. There are "regions" "in which objects are clustered together and boundaries are drawn around each cluster" (1994: 643), and there are "networks" which are series of elements having well-defined relations. These are well-known, preferential ways of framing social phenomena. However, Mol and Law identify a third type of space, which is different from the first two: fluid space. In fluid space, there are neither boundaries nor stable relations. In fluids things "tend to stick together" (ibid:661). These three types of space frame social phenomena in certain ways that have consequences for how we can

understand them. In the following I want to explore the use of these spatial framings in the context of the formation of (Christian) identity at a Dutch Christian school for higher vocational education. A regional approach to identity formation would emphasize (the construction of) boundaries that divide "us" from "them" (for instance, "Christians" versus "non-Christians") and that define one's own identity by opposing and negating the identity of the others. Thus, the meaning of identity is constructed spatially by way of drawing sharp lines between inside and outside. A network approach affirms the regional "identity work" of creating insides and outsides, but would itself emphasize processes of formation that define the inside. It looks for elements of meaning (signs such as "words," "texts," but also physical objects like buildings, or the interiors of buildings) that together form a more or less coherent and stable relational net work. The third type of contextualizing, the fluid, is quite different in character from the former two. In the fluid, identity is not formed by way of boundaries, nor by stable relations within a network (the inside of identity). On the contrary, identity is being formed by the juxtapositions of things (signs, elements) that don't fit together. Identity formation turns out, then, to be an unstable and heterogeneous process that can have unforeseen and even undesirable outcomes.

Thus, identity formation can be considered as a process of bounding, of relating and of mixing. In the remaining of this chapter I will provide all three of these framings of identity formation with empirical illustrations.

Regional identity

The regional manner of approaching a social problem is to provide a local phenomenon with a context that transcends the partic ularities of the local. The attempt here is to create a broader, more general and generalizing frame that bas the power to explain all kinds of other related problems with different time and space co-ordinates. In the case of the construction of identity at a Christian organization in Dutch society at the end of the twentieth century, there is a powerful story available, namely the (de)pillarization of Dutch society. One of the most influential books on the topic is that of Lijphart (1976). According to this popular view, Dutch "civil society" in the past century was split into three "pillars": the Catholic pillar, the Protestant pillar, and the non- denominational pillar (divided into a socialist and liberal pillar). Pillars were, according to Lijphart, simply, certain groups of the population (1976:35). "A pillar is an integrated complex of public organisations or institutions based on an ideological view of life" (ibid.). Every pillar had its own network of public organizations, which met the needs of educ ation, healthcare, press, politics etc. The inherent organizational charac ter of each was of great importance to the stability and coherence of the pillars. The organizations held the pillar "in place," so to speak. Yet at the same time the pillars were the embodiment of sharp religious and

social-economic dividing-lines in Dutch society. These divisions enabled groups and individuals to construct a well-defined identity through the organizations of one's pillar. As Righart (1996:10), a Dutch social scientist, once put it: the pillars gave their members "symbols, rituals, antagonistic images and vocabularies" with which to construct their separate identities. An important tale was played by a "pillarized" education system that not only divided "the youth into separated social circles", but also engenderd "differences in values" (Lijphart 1976:65). According to Lijphart, since the 1960's a process of "depillarization" has occurred. The dividing lines grew steadily blurred. "As a consequence the ties between pillar organizations of every pillar have been weakened", Lijphart noted (ibid:12). The above analysis of Dutch society, and the position of Protestant-Christian organizations in it, is principally guided by the metaphor of the pillar, which in itself has spatial connotations. The metaphor emphasizes verticality and division. Identities are taken as stable, homogeneous, clear-cut, centered, and organized. The identity of an individual or a group is clearly delineated by its cqntrast to that of others of anoth er pillar. The boundaries, then, are well defined. Using a term from Mol and Law, identity construction in this context was "regional." The use of the metaphor of "pillar" is possible because a regional spatiality is presupposed. This regional framing leads to an analysis of "the social," and consequently of that of identity, in which difference and similarity are unproblematically discerned. "So it's possible to build a version of the social in which space is exclusive. Neat divisions, no overlap. Here or there, each place is located at one side of a boundary. It is thus that an 'inside' and an 'outside' are created. What is similar is close. What is different, is elsewhere" (Mol and Law 1994:647).

The "region" favors a view from above, a perspective from outside, instead of from below and from within a pillar. As such, it does not talk about differences *within* a pillar, nor about actions of "real" groups and individuals. It misses activities that cross the borders of the "pillarized" groups of the population. Crossings and multiple identification cannot be easily accounted for within this framework because this would undermine not only the pillar, but also the perspective on identity construction itself. As such, it misses dynamic and change, and it is unable to present an alternative to a regional construction of Christian identity. The process of depillarization assumes the same premises. What, then, is the alternative to a regional construction of Christian identity? The regional type of space seems to have nothing to say about situated activity. It carries the danger of "being historically over-privileged in social science and blind to their own embedding in tacit, locally and historically situated activity" (Rampton 1998:13).

Even so, does this criticism of the "regional" construction of identity mean that we should dismiss it altogether as being of little value in providing us with insight into local processes of identity-construction? I would say, no. In fact, one may argue that Lijphart's analysis of Dutch society is itself based on regional presuppositions, and as such are

situated activities. His analysis provides a framework for understanding Dutch society ara general level. It even provides a possible explanatory framework with which to account for the removal of the word "Christian" from the name of Windesheim school. Moreover, Lijphart's conceptualization of the structures of Dutch society provides people with a framework and a vocabulary to give meaning to their own situation. This is what Anthony Giddens said about analytical concepts that are formed in an academic context: "The concepts that sociological observers inyent are 'second order' concepts in so far as they presume certain conceptual capabilities on the part of actors to whose conduct they refer. But it is in the nature of social science that these can become 'first order' concepts by being appropriated within social life itself " (1984:284).

This certainly applies to the regional framing of identity-construction. In my research on the identity of Christian organizations (see Vermeulen 2001), I found that individuals gave accounts and carried out discussions concerning identity by framing it in a regional way (despite Lijphart's characterization of Dutch society as having become "de-pillarized"). For instance, at a conference on the Protestant-Christian identity of schools for lower vocational education, participants always brought the discussion back to the question "but how are we different from schools based on a humanistic view of ljfe?" This regional framing seemed to determine very much their way of thinking and talking. In that sense it can be seen as expressive for their own identity: the way people talk about the construction of their identity can be seen as part of their identity. It is part of their own expressive repertoire.

Mol and Law (1994), however, argue that regional presuppositions are not spatially neutral, but rather are the product of another kind of spacing based on a network. (Lijphart mentioned this already in his analysis of the pillarized society by suggesting that a pillar exist as a network of organisations.)

Network identity

The existence of a network is illustrated with a short discursive analysis of a policy text produced by the management of Windesheim
Here, the network is constructed by means of language. This does not mean that the substance of networks is solely or predominantly linguistic. In fact, its elements can comprise all sorts of heterogeneous semiotic material (see Law 1994).
The chapter of the Windesheim text in which the identity of the school is defined begins with a discussion of current society, regionally framed. Two sentences stand out in particular. One begins, "In the economic-technological domain we see: an insufficient dedication to a durable environment [and] the persistence of immense differences , in opportunities for living between a rich minority and a poor majority of the world population." The other states, "In the social-cultural domain we see: ongoing processes of

individualization, together with social and ethnic fragmentation of society [and] increasing confusion about questions of sense making." A number of observations can be made about these sentences. Firstly, the metaphor of "domain" fits into the regional framing. Secondly, the wording of societal "problematics," stated in rather static terms and in a negative tone, as appears here, is strikingly similar to well-known sociological analyses of late-modern western societies. Moreover, the regionally framed analysis of society functions as an element in the network that is constructed in the text, which aims to define the school's identity.

The negative and static analysis of society appears to be the backdrop against which a positive construction of the school's identity can subsequently be made. This is evident in so fat as the sentences continue thus: "For many the school is seen only as supplier of knowledge and manpower in service of the economic-technological process. By that society is does not do justice to itself. Windesheim cannot accept having to function as a kind of knowledge-factory exclusively." Here, Windesheim, characterized as a "knowledge-factory," is treated in relation to the earlier regional analysis of society. The argument is being constructed as one of differing views as to the role of the school (namely Windesheim) in society. Now, in the following step of the argumentative network, the rejection of the image of Windesheim as a "knowledge-factory" cao be translated in positive terms - as the *alternative.* "The societal responsibility that is accepted by Windesheim is the recognition that ethics and economics, respect and technics ought to be connected in a vital manner." Clearly, the positive terms used in the text are "societal responsibility" and the pedagogic concept of "learning to learn."

This last sentence is a response to the one that preceded it, as is clear from the verbal play regarding what Windesheim does and does not accept. The word "connected" is used in relation to the underlying regional analysis of society. Furthermore, the pedagogy of "learning to learn" introduces into the school new relations between students and teachers, and between students. The student is expected to learn by way of self-study, and the role of the teacher is transformed into that of a supervisor of the learning-processes of the student: Many schools in the Netherlands at that time were already beginning to introduce this unique pedagogy.

In this text, the concept of "learning to learn" is related to other phrases and words that have religious associations: "[A] Human being is a relational being and, thus, his personal learning-process is a socially determined process. In meeting the other, he learns to develop himself and to know himself deeply. In meeting the other, human being is at the same time meeting that Other." Clearly, it is from this point that the identity of Windesheim as a school is being constructed in positive terms, by opposing the self-created (or at least self-chosen) analysis of society. The negative influences of con-

temporary economic and cultural processes are overcome by presenting Windesheim as a "meeting place," based on "societal responsibility" and the concept of "learning to learn." In other words, the regional framing bas created the space for a network which defines Windesheim as a kind of meeting place. Concomitantly, the construction of the network affirms the regional boundaries (see Law 2000:7). This is the point that Mol and Law are making when they state that "…[the region] is an effect or product which depends on another quite different kind of space, the space of networks. This isn't regional in character, but is generated within a *network topology.* A network is a series of elements with well defined relations between them" (1994:649). Moreover, the "meeting" mentioned in the text above alludes to the religious identity of the school. The next step in this process of identity construction is to explicate the content of the religious inspiration, and this is stated in the following manner:

> We do not choose for a certain theological current or ecclesiastical direction. We do join the broad stream of 'Gods people on its way', throughout time. Our partners are all those who, whatever their philosophy of life, stand for the striving towards justice, peace and a durable world. That is the quest. None of us owns the (whole) truth.

What is remarkable here is the fact that the text suggests that the school opens its doors to all students, including non-Christians, "whatever their philosophy of life." Everyone that strives for justice, peace, and a durable world is welcome to participate in the quest. No regions are created between Christians and non-Christians, as was the case in pillarized society. There are no regions delineated along religious boundaries. In this sense, the view on religion that is expressed here fits as an element of the network that identifies Windesheim as a "meeting place."

On the following page, however, it is written: "For Windesheim the biblical notions with regard to justice, peace and the concern for a durable society are normative. These notions are not ready-made blue-prints, but functions as beacons, that lay out the course for our quest." Thus, in order to be included in the meeting place, that Windesheim aspires to be, the *biblical* notions of justice, peace, and a durable society must be endorsed. Not just any notion will do, and this clearly performs an exclusionary function. The regional presuppositions underlying the construction of identity in Christian organizations are being preserved, but my discursive analysis shows that the network is of a spatial type than is different from that of region. They may mutually support, or even implicate, each other; but they are not the same. The network-pre- suppositions enable us, as students of social theory, to open the regions and go inside. There we can see the nature of elements and relations that produce the region as an effect. The region is then shown as a construction, not as same sort of objective reality. Within the spatial frame of the network there is no inside or outside, as in the frame of regions. Rather, there is

relational variety. As Mol and Law suggest, "'here' and 'there' are not objects or attributes that lie insides or outside a set of boundaries It is a question of the network elements and the way they hang together" (1994:649).

Fluid identity

The construction of identity involves a process of distinguishing between what it is and what it is not, and of defining elements and relations between them in a network. In bath cases the result is a concept of identity that is stable, though not necessarily homogeneous because both similarity and difference exist within a network of relations. Mol and Law propose an alternative spatial metaphor that deals differently with the performance of social difference and similarity - *the fluid.*

As I said at the beginning of this paper, the main entrance of Windesheim is beset with confusion. It is not clear what really is the main entrance of the school. The ambiguity is related to the differences that are created between the original buildings of the school and the newer ones. When entering the doors of the original main building, this ambiguity is not solved. The "central canteen" is located here. It is an open space in which various activities take place and which is full of heterogeneous objects: the reception of the school, the dining place, a cafeteria, a central place for chairs and tables, the "silence center" *("stiltecentrum* ') of the student parish, a place for playing table football and table tennis, a selling-point for office-equipment, readers and copy machines. The place as a whole was originally intended as a multifunctional space. The first chairman of the school favored the idea of using the space for all sorts of communal activities, including the organization of religious services. The Christian identity of the school formed the inspiration for the architectural design of the "central canteen." A series of eleven paintings hang on the circular wall of the "central canteen," in a circIe. The artwork as a whole is called *Alpha et Omega; Jacob and the Angel?* Both the beginning and the ending point of the circle of painting is formed by the "silence center" of the student parish. It is a small chapel inside the canteen. It is freely accessible and meant to serve as a public space for small groups and individuals who want to retreat for short moments of meditation. (The title of the artwork refers to the biblical story in Genesis (32:22-32) about the wrestling during the night between Jacob and an unknown man. It is the night before Jacob's renewed confrontation with bis brother Esau. After the fight, in the early morning, Jacob is blessed by the man. He is given a new name: Israël, which means literally "he who fights with God.").

The circle of paintings and the centrality of the silence center tried to impose a certain religiously inspired order on the meaning and use of the "central canteen," located in what was originally, unambiguously, the central building of the school. Yet, this order, or this intention to order, has changed over the years. The circle of paintings is still in its place, as is the "silence center." The placing of Coca Cola and Mars vending machines

and of posters and advertisements in juxtaposition to the paintings bas interrupted the original order of things. And the centrality (in a material as well in a symbolic sense) of the "silence center" bas been encroached upon by the juxtaposition of a new, colorful commercial cafeteria *Jack and Judy's.* The ordering of the "central canteen" bas become "heterotopic": "an ordering that takes place through a juxtaposition of signs that culturally are seen as not going together, either because their relationship is new or because it is unexpected" (Hetherington 1997:9).

The point I want to make with this description and analysis of the canteen's interior is that the respective elements do not establish well-defined relations, as is the case in a network. The heterotopic relations are of a fluid type. There are no clear relations between the elements. Instead, there is ambiguity. But still the elements go together, in one way or another. The juxtaposition of contrasting elements does, in its own way, define the 'central canteen' as a kind of meeting place. But it does so in a way that is quite different from the idea of 'meeting place' that is described in the policy text. Consequently, what Mol and Law have to say about fluids seems to apply here: "In a fluid space it's not possible to determine identities nice and neatly, once and for all. Or to distinguish inside from outside, this place from somewhere else. Similarity and difference aren't like identity and non-identity. They come, as it were, in varying shades and colours. They go together. A fluid world is a world of *mixtures"* (1994:660).

Framed in terrns of a fluid, the Christian identity of Windesheim now appears less stable and clear-cut than both the regional and the network framing would otherwise suggest. As such, it also appears much less problematic, for in a fluid contextualization, contrasting objects may nevertheless appear together in albeit "strange" concordance.

Conclusion

In this essay the notions of region, network, and fluid were explored in relation to identity formation at a Christian school. Because identity is a relational and context-dependent concept, identity formation should be understood as situated activity. Following this position, the data used to gain insight into identity, are grounded - localized - in their context of production. The data, the linguistic (text) as well as the material (physical objects), were interpreted as *signs.* This means that they stood for something else, namely for "a way of redefining Christian identity at the Windesheim school." They referred to Christian identity in a way that is not self-evident. Semiotic analysis of textual and other signs in this essay revealed their meaningful relation to the process of identity formation. The way the concrete signs are contextualized or framed, however, determines their interpretation. Three ways of framing were discussed: regional, as a network, and fluid. Regional framing understands- formation of Christian identity in terms of the differences

with other denominations in Dutch society; the *locus* of identity formation is in the boundaries between different identities. The network framing sees Christian identity as a constructed, though coherent and stable, meaningful "meeting place" defined by relations between societal views, pedagogy, and biblical notions. The *locus* here is to be found in the substantial elements of identity and their relations. The fluid framing, lastly, conceives of Christian identity as a heterogeneous set of contrasting elements, which lead here to "strange" and unexpected connections between religious and commercial objects and activities; the *locus* is the juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements.   There is no one-liner that concludes this essay. But at least it can be argued that there is no single ("best") way of dealing with identity formation, or with the redefining of Christian identity at Windesheim The three framings discussed here must be seen as contemporaneous. Probably each situated activity of identity formation is a matter of bounding, relating, and mixing.

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