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INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS IN YOUTH MINISTRY RESEARCH: A COMPARATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

In this article, the emerging field of youth ministry research is presented and interpreted through the lens of practical theology. International developments are described and compared as local responses to the ongoing global dynamics of youth culture. After an overview of four different contexts in which youth ministry research can be situated, the article discusses four thematic dimensions of this research: globalization, vulnerability, politics, and interreligious encounter. In the third part of the article these dimensions are theologically reflected in order to unravel four chances and challenges for future practical theological research.

Conducting international comparative research in practical theology is far from evident. For the very concept of praxis is connected to the idea of the local community, with its own understanding, enactment, and assessment of religious practices. Engaging in practical theology, and by extension in every form of praxis-sensible theology (Veling 1998), is “doing local theology” (Sedmak 2003), is engaging in a contextualized reflection on how human beings are dealing with the “slow questions” in their life journeys, questions that do not endure “fast food answers,” and how they create in the midst of that process and in relationship with institutionalized forms of religion their own “auto-*theo*-biographies” (Ward 2008). After many years of international collaboration in the fields of religious education (RE) and youth ministry (YM)—two important access routes to practical theological research—I am becoming more and more aware of the structural difficulty of *comparative* research in these fields.

In the recent past I had many chances to network between researchers of different language groups, different local settings and theologies in Europe and abroad, as the president of the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry (www.iasym.net), as an expert in the Council of Europe, as a regular contributor to the conferences of the European Forum of Teachers in Religious Education (www.

eftre.net) and to the Dutch, German, and North-American RE associations. However, even within one and the same language group, the differences were often huge and difficult to master. Belgium and the Netherlands, for instance, are neighboring countries, they use (partly) the same language, but still are so completely different in school and parish life culture. Hard to believe, but driving 120 kilometers from Leuven in Belgium to Tilburg University in the north and crossing the Dutch border often meant for me something like a culture shock!

Nevertheless there is one important element that forces us gently into a worldwide collegial and comparative reflection on practical theology in our work with young people in RE and YM, namely the issue of globalization. It is my contention that local theologies in RE and YM are in one way or another responding to this global issue. The dynamics of the globe (such as the international market, the social media, migration movements, common ecological concerns, etc.) are affecting the embodied lives of people living locally on that globe. The world is literally at our doorstep, or even more intimate, at our finger tips. We are universally connected in our vulnerable particularities. In this article I focus on research in YM, on the practices of local congregations and institutions in their work with young people and young adults, vis-à-vis these developments (for a report on RE, see Roebben 2009).

This article contains three parts: after a presentation of four organizational *con-texts* of international YM research, I will briefly discuss four central themes or *texts* in YM research. In the third part I will look deeper into the *textures* of these themes in order to unravel four challenges for future research in practical theology. The lens that I am using is the scholarly writing of colleagues in the field, in which I sense a deep commitment to local practices and reflections. My endeavor here is an exercise in modesty: gathering respectfully—as far as I can see with my subjective lens—the richness of the fruits of this research, inviting the readership to reflect on the different positions and offering building blocks for something of which I hope that can become a new and strong “revelatory fellowship” (Paul Tillich) in practical theology.

CONTEXTS FOR YM RESEARCH: GIVING YOUNG PEOPLE A REAL VOICE

Youth ministry (in German *Jugendseelsorge*, in French *pastorale des jeunese*, in Spanish *pastoral de juventud*, in Dutch *jongerenpastoraal*) relates to the activities of churches and faith communities to

support young people and young adults in their moral and religious identity development. Worldwide there is a huge interest in research in this part of church work, but not always free from the instrumental concerns of adults. Or young people are the future and this is precisely what is often lacking in traditional communities and mainstream churches. In order to get a glimpse of the seismographic function of young people, the ways in which they mirror the global dynamics in contemporary societies, and in order to respond adequately to these dynamics with “purpose driven” ministry, huge amounts of money are spent to conduct (both quantitative and qualitative) empirical youth research. Adults want to know and to be sure about how young people and young adults organize their lives, witness to their values, norms, and ultimate meanings and rely on official providers of spirituality and religion in congregations and communities.

It goes without saying that it is important to know where the juvenile addressees of pastoral ministry can be found and how they can be nurtured. It remains, however, a difficult task to adapt empirical research methods to the complex and flexible life worlds of youth (Roebben 2011b, 43–62). At the one hand data gathering is often blind for new and creative developments in youth cultures. At the other hand data are often overestimated with regard to possible ways of attracting (or even forcing) youth into the official church and its ministry. As far as I am concerned it seems necessary to develop new ways of looking carefully and empathetically to the world of young people and their religiosity. Predominantly the voices of young people themselves should be heard in all stages of youth and YM research: in the perception of the topic, in the definition of the problem, in the actual gathering of data and in the discussion and implementation afterward.

Giving young people a real voice, which means listening to their longings and dreams in a comprehensive way, relates to another problem: the ignorance and omission of humanities in general and youth studies in particular to deal with religious and spiritual topics (Lechner and Gabriel 2008). For instance, the so called *Shell-Jugendstudie* in Germany, a regular state of the art report on youth cultures, did not include a topic on religiosity until the survey of 2006, mainly because the instrument to measure new forms of de-institutionalized and individualized religion was lacking. Yet other research circles have registered the need to open up their secular methods for the spiritual dimension of the lives of young people in a post-secular era (Benson et al. 2008). This ambiguity can, as far as I am concerned, only be solved if the

peer dimension, so crucial in YM, namely that young people minister to each other, is also used for research means. Again, in order to understand what young people really believe, hope and love, they should be invited to become the real agents of perception, interpretation, and change (see, judge, act), in other words, to become real researchers themselves! Educational research on inclusion could be helpful here, research in which “the involvement of children and young people and their families in identifying the kinds of questions which need to be asked about inclusion and exclusion could be an important first step towards providing the kind of knowledge that will be of use” (Allan 2008, 146).

In what follows I describe in a non-exhaustive way four *loci* where voices of young people can be heard, thanks to the explicit religious youth and YM research that has been giving a floor to these voices (Roebben 2011d). The list of initiatives is definitely much longer and a good inventory is lacking. My intention is not to give an exhaustive overview. This short list should rather be seen as an invitation to the international research community to cooperate more intensively in gathering, exchanging and interpreting relevant data on this relevant topic. The relevance is global, but the presence of the entire globe in the research is painfully a non-presence. I come back to this later. The description of the four categories follows the line from the macro-perspective (society), via the meso-perspective (church and school) to the micro-perspective (the individual).

First of all, large-scale data sets are available in the Western world on youth and religion, religiosity, and spirituality, just to mention a few: “Youth in Europe” (Ziebertz and Kay 2005, 2006, 2009), “Soul Searching” in the United States (Smith and Lundquist Denton 2005; Dean 2010), “Visualising hope” in Eastern Europe (Dunlop 2008), “Generation Y” in the United Kingdom (Savage, Collins-Mayo, and Mayo 2006), and youth spirituality research in Australia (McQuillan 2007). Country reports can be found on the desks of local research entities. Regional and local congregations investigate on a regular basis the position of their children with regard to churches, congregations, faith communities, and sects, like was argued before.

A second stream of research activities can be found on the meso-level, in ecclesiology and ministry studies. They relate to the world of youth churches, alternative worship, emerging churches, religious events, pastoral care, and youth catechesis. Just to mention a few initiatives in this respect: research on community building in the United

Kingdom (Baker 2011; Ward 2002), on youth liturgy (Sonnenberg and Barnard 2008; Stams 2008), on confirmation in European protestant churches (Schweitzer, Ilg, and Simojoki 2010), on religious learning in church contexts (Afdal 2011), on the motivations of youth to participate in large religious events such as the World Youth Day (Scharnberg 2010), on the impact of ecumenical and interreligious gatherings on juvenile spirituality (Santos 2008), on the professionalization of youth leaders (Roebben and Zondervan 2008), on outreach activities (Warren 2002) and summer camps (Roebben 2009, 219–231), and so on. Central to these findings is the idea that young people with their creativity and openness are reinventing and revitalizing the complex inner dynamic of mystics and politics within churches.

Thirdly, there is a growing interest in YM and young adult ministry studies, mostly related to the life world of the school campus. Historically the origins of YM can be found in the presence of representatives of the church in the world of the school. The relational approach of “Young Life” in the United States for instance was in the first part of the 20th century intentionally focused on entering “the foreign world of the high school adolescent to save it for Christ” (Root 2009, 22). Later the relationship became framed in a more open and inviting rather than in persuasive way and focused also on the college campus where young adults are gathering with their “big questions and worthy dreams” (Daloz Parks 2000). This idea of ministry with adolescents and young adults, understood as creating personal relationships (the so called *personales Angebot* in German) (Steinkamp), was and still is the paradigmatic option for YM in Europe (Roebben 2009, 187–200). The Roman-Catholic and Protestant churches are still vividly present in the world of schools in Europe, specifically through their (confessional) RE courses in primary and secondary schools, but also through their pastoral presence. Affiliations of church and school (in German: *Schule in kirchlicher Trägerschaft*) are still high on the agenda, although the secularization has changed much of the content. A shift can be observed from institutional religious belonging to individual moral consultancy of youth, from the school as faith community to the school as a community of values (in Dutch: *waardegemeenschap*) (Geurts 2008; Schweitzer and Scheilke 1999). The newest research in this respect describes the ways in which young adults can be introduced in the world of religious practices, for example, in the religious life of monasteries (Smeets 2007) and in reflections on the relationship between profession and vocation, for example, as future teachers

(Banning 2007; Van Aalsum 2011; Roebben 2011c). Interesting to see how this field of attention has an equivalent in the United States with the movement of “linking social identity to community practices” (Dean 2004, 152, with extensive bibliography; Mahan et al. 2008).

And finally the whole body of research on spirituality of children (Hay and Nye 1998) and young people (Yust et al. 2005) in the Anglo-Saxon world and on theologizing with children and young people in the German, Dutch, and Scandinavian discourse (Büttner 2007; Kraft, Roose, and Büttner 2011; Schlag and Schweitzer 2011; Yde Iversen, Mitchell, and Pollard 2009) needs to be mentioned here. The impact of this research stream, in which the traditional idea of handing over faith is replaced by an organic idea of raising the spiritual awareness of children and educating the critical reflection of young people and young adults, is huge and developing at a steady pace.

The description of the context of YM in these four research tracks—data on religious youth cultures, on explicit YM initiatives, on the presence of faith communities in the public realm, and on the spiritual and theological voices of young people—seems to me of central value for any researcher in the field. In a context of globalization there is an urgent need to compare these findings internationally and to exchange educational methods in order to improve perceptions of and responses to the spiritual voices of youth. Moreover, there is an urgent need to include voices from the Southern Hemisphere. Globalization is affecting youth and young adults “all over the place,” but we do not have a clue of what really is happening “on the spot” in the South. The many voices of youth there and the vulnerable responses of local churches to these voices are not even heard, let alone scholarly registered. As far as I can see only two books deal explicitly with international findings, including the South: “Global Youth Ministry” (Linhart and Livermore 2011) and “Youth, Religion and Globalization” (Osmer and Dean 2006). The “slow questions” that young people raise in a context of “fast living” are comparable on a global scale. The material circumstances of poverty, oppression, and migration, however, to deal with these questions differ radically between the continents of our globe. The awareness is growing in global institutions such as *Unicef*, *Unesco*, and the *United Nations’ Alliance of Civilizations* that the spiritual awareness of youth and the contribution of religions need to be considered as an integral dimension of the well-being of youth worldwide.

THEMATIC SCRIPTS IN YM RESEARCH: ANALYZING EMERGING PROBLEM FIELDS

I now analyze four themes that shape the practical theological discussion on YM worldwide. One of the major observations in a context of growing globalization is that young people (but not only they!) are desperately looking for orientation in the midst of an overwhelming market place of life styles, values, norms, and meaning-giving systems. In psychotherapy and pastoral ministry sessions young people often express their feelings of permanently jumping into the void, into a vacuum “full of meaninglessness.” They lack the points of reference to name and tame what they see and experience. Old master stories or dogmatic answers do not work anymore in everyday life. But also the “terrorism” of “anything goes,” combined with the obsessive power of a hyper-personalized narration, remains unsatisfying. On the contrary, it is sometimes literally “killing” people. The moral and spiritual compass in the heart of the postmodern self is running wild. Moreover young people are struggling with the feeling that they are left alone by adults (Champagne 2009, 3; Metz 2011, 205; Moore and Right 2007). Deep down, however, in the stomach of society, there is a longing to overcome individualism and egocentrism by compassion, commitment, communication, communion—values that all begin with the prefix “com” (which means: together with, connected to). Connection, dealing with diversity and complexity in a connected way—living and learning as “receiving the gift of friendship” (Reinders 2008; Roebbens 2011a)—seems to me a key challenge for the future. In the heart of the post-secular society new and vital spiritual connections are sought for and crafted by young contemporaries. This is a hopeful development. What now can be considered as four dimensions of this process? How do they trigger the attention of faith communities and research centers?

The first theme that occurs and that has already been mentioned several times in this article is globalization: “the compression of time and space and the extension of modernity at large” (Robert Schreiter, quoted in Mallon 2004, 140). During one of the “pilgrimages of hope” of the Taizé community, in Brussels 2009, I was astonished to see that young people gathered from everywhere in the capital of Europe, not to consume or to have fun, but to share . . . silence. Their concern for a better world, for greater peace and human understanding, drove these people together on the crystallized holy ground of Taizé-in-Brussels.

Yet, at the same time this experience was radiated like sunbeams through the new media, via weblogs, cell phones, digitalized words, and pictures “all over the place.” The good news revealed in shared silence was electronically extended to the whole world as well as conveyed over conversation to their guest families. Gathered by the same experience these young adults formed a “liquid church” (Ward 2002): the universal and the particular interwoven, the globalized world compressed in Brussels and extended through new media as a radically new *locus theologicus*. The research questions are manifold: Where and how can adolescents and young adults learn to balance between the uniqueness of their own life project and the necessity of being “wired” and “linked” to a globalizing society and culture as a whole? Where and how can they find spiritual guidance in order to ponder the different options and horizons for a faithful life?

A second consideration relates to the vulnerability of young people. In their personal search for meaning solid orientations are often absent. Even the very grounds for existence and co-existence with others are sometimes lacking. Young people are then caught up in the tension between apathy and extremism. In a YM perspective this can be translated in the tension between an indifferent but “benign whateverism” or a radical “living and dying for God” (Smith and Lundquist Denton 2005; Dean 2010). There is comparative evidence that this dichotomy can be found transculturally, not only in the Christian tradition and not only in the United States (Van Dijk-Groeneboer 2010). On a global scale the need for a more holistic YM is expressed, especially in circumstances of mental distress, such as family breakdown, HIV-Aids, poverty, and corruption. People are craving for a solid message in the midst of the “mess-age” in which they try to survive (Kiamu 2011). New connections of the churches’ YM to community work, street corner and peer ministry, schools, and other networks are urgently needed (Leys 2011). How can the dimension of liberation and hope be stimulated in YM (Parker 2003; Moore and Right 2007)? What are the relationships between globalization, religion, human flourishing, and deeply embodied situations of distress? Where and how can churches be helpful in this respect?

The third script relates to the previous ones. Every form of YM and by extension YM research has a political dimension. The choices that are made in perceiving and recording the voices of youth are based on the socioethical presuppositions of the listening churches and the recording research institute. In a marvelous book three YM specialists in the United States write: “When religious educators, youth

ministers, and others encourage youth to claim *early and easy transcendence* over cultural distortions, they are playing directly into the hands of distorted elements of the culture. It is precisely the compensatory character of such early denials of the power of social scripts that sponsors later suspicion of the efficacy of faith to resist cultural distortions of being and doing” (Mahan, Warren, and White 2008, 85). And they continue: “Society, for its part, is more than happy to complement our tendencies toward intellectual, moral, and spiritual sloth by providing prefab answers to life’s most enduring and complex problems, challenges, and dilemmas. (. . .) This is especially true about the turning points of life, those *kairos* moments when we start anew, when we are invited to take a different direction or to confirm one we already travel. There are no scripts for such occasions. There are, however, thank God, fellow travellers (. . .). We need to talk about these things openly, prayerfully” (Mahan et al. 2008, 102–103). One of the authors of the aforementioned book, David White, develops in this respect his religio-political framework for “practicing discernment with youth.” He therefore uses the triad “see-judge-act” (complemented with prayer and imagination), a powerful hermeneutic tool that has its equivalent in the European “Catholic Action with Youth” of Jozef Cardijn in the middle of the 20th century (White 2005, 89–200).

The final observation to be made here is how religious diversity is interfering with globalization and the ongoing need for orientation. The expertise of interreligious learning in European schools, in the framework of “learning in the presence of the other” (Roebben 2009, 127–149, following the work of Mary C. Boys) or “inter-spiritual learning” (i.e., not between members of faith communities but between concrete fellows in the classroom) can be helpful here. “The critical encounter reinforces the ability to look deeper into one’s own meaning-giving system and to explore further the existential resilience it offers. Through the intercultural and inter-religious encounter I am challenged to re-define myself, to know myself better, and respect myself more, as a human person with dignity, who makes a difference through encounter with others” (Roebben 2009, 147). The “Interfaith Youth Core” of the American Muslim educationalist Eboo Patel has developed concrete ways of “doing” this encounter through service learning, in order “to identify what is common between religions,” but also to create safe space “where each can articulate its distinct path to that place” (Patel 2007, 167). Where can such space, safe for diversity, be installed? What is the contribution of faith communities in this respect?

DEEP TEXTURES OF YM RESEARCH: CHANCES AND CHALLENGES FOR PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

The local contexts of YM research are offering us the main texts and thematic scripts for further discussion and cooperation. On the basis of our common concerns and passion for youth, I believe that we are able to develop a common research language that helps us to understand better the differences and communalities. Living on the same globe, confronted with the same questions, young people (and their researchers) develop different answers, because they are members of different local faith (and research) communities. Their contexts and texts are deeply textured by the pedagogical and theological discourses in which they are embedded.

Let me clarify my argument with an example. After many years of encountering American scholars and discussing European approaches to religion and education with them, the central difference between the two continents seems to be an educational one, with historical roots in society and politics. In the United States it is unconstitutional to teach the inner dynamic of religion at school. Church and state are formally separated. Religion belongs to the private sphere of the family and the congregation and the nurturing and accompanying programs there. In Europe the intentional and spontaneous relationships between young people and religions are discussed publicly in all its complexity and diversity in the RE classroom. The training of future RE teachers is mainly organized by faculties and institutes of theology and religious studies. There is an internal link between theological discourse, religious experience, and critical education. This is not the case in the United States, although some scholars are pleading for training in religious literacy (interpreted as teaching *about* religion), integrated in school subjects such as history, literature, and social sciences (American Academy of Religion 2010; Moore 2007).

As far as I can see this situation has an influence on the status of theology in public life. In the United States theological reflection mainly takes place within the congregation. In Europe it can be executed in the open space of public life. This involves two different kinds of theology in the context of youth. In the United States churches work mainly with YM, they deepen affirmatively the theological competence of youth through the participation at practices within one faith tradition, visualized in the congregation, initiated *into* religious nurture and inner conversion by convincing youth ministers. In Europe churches work more through their presence in RE in the public and

private school system, they interfere critically with the religious convictions of youth through knowledge *about* and reflective learning *from* each other's practices, sometimes heavily discussed in the classroom, mainly through a critical appropriation of diversity in the personal stance (*Bildung*), prepared and moderated by an authentic and self-critical teacher. Two different *rationales* are beyond the same practice: introducing young people in the world of religion(s). Two different *rationales* are beyond the same research topic: reflecting on young people when they are introduced in the world of religion(s)!

Nevertheless, anchored in a positive idea of comparative research, I now briefly present four textures for the further development of practical theology. The first encompasses the need for new research designs. Actual youth ministry offers not only a great deal of valuable research questions but also interesting concrete routes of dealing with these questions. As I argued in the introduction of this article new forms of "peer related" research in the world of youth need to be stimulated. Thomas Schlag and Friedrich Schweitzer (2011) offer an interesting threefold framework for this cooperation, in the way that they are convinced that the implicit and personal "theologies of youth" should be the starting point for educational (read: explicit and reflected) processes of "theology with youth" and "theology for youth." This first step, however, is a difficult one: it radically demands a conversion of the researcher. The American practical theologian Tom Beaudoin is very (self-)critical in this respect to "Soul Searching" and its underlying moralizing discourse: "The simplest evidence for this moralizing is that Soul Searching never considers that contemporary teen belief may have something substantially spiritually constructive and new, not just alarming, to teach the larger church" (Beaudoin 2008, 85). Critical studies through sustainable, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary approaches are urgently needed, but not only in practical theology!

A second line of thought could be the relationship between ministry, community, and leadership. The American YM researcher Andrew Root (2009) deepens the strategy of relational and missional YM into a theology of incarnational and even kenotic YM. In "place sharing" with young people the minister engages in "participating in the living presence of God together with them right now" (Root 2009, 113). The English practical theologian Pete Ward (2008) argues: "When one is working in the field of the proclamation of the gospel with youth, theology needs not to be adapted to this situation. One is already participating in the expression and circulation of theology"

(Ward 2008, 48). Here again the theological and political conversion of the youth minister is at stake. His task is “setting up contexts where the vital questions affecting young adults can be asked as part of a prayerful communal search for wisdom. Lacking such contexts some people may say later, ‘We asked for bread and you gave us stone’” (Michael Warren, in Mahan 2008, 57–58). This place sharing is fundamentally an act of conversion.

The third consideration is about learning processes in the church. The irreverent quest for meaning is a right to be observed by every human being, including children and youth. Every human being has the right to develop his or her personal catechism (Karl Rahner), to undertake his or her own journey in faith, to create his/her own intensive communion with God and fellow believers. The Spirit is moving in this learning process of young people; it is the locomotive power “that transcend(s) their daily fragmentation and make(s) them feel whole” (Dean 2004, 101). Will churches be able to respond to the movements of the Spirit in the lives of young people? For Dean a new “curriculum of passion” (2004, 161–172) is needed. The elaboration of it reminds me strongly of the spiritual theology of Meister Eckhart (14th century) and the mystagogical theology of Karl Rahner (20th century)—two German scholars who have lost nothing of their theological relevance for today. Once again, for this form of religious and theological education (and related research) a deep conversion and humility are needed. It all boils down to “lowering the bar of transcendence” (Dean 2004, 111).

And finally, these observations have strong implications for the textured relationship between practical and systematic theology. The tension between “theology of youth” and “theology for youth,” between “*théologie forte*” (in the academy and the church) and “*théologie faible*” or “lay theology” (Schlag and Schweitzer 2011, 22–24 and 47–51) are challenging. This tension should be productive and creative, rather than destructive. I believe that practical and systematic theologians can encounter each other on a deeper level in their public presence, when they engage together in a globalizing society and try to read the signs of the times in the light of the gospel. Once again, conversion is the key word.

CONCLUSION

The incarnational dynamic of YM challenges practical theological research. In a context of globalization and radical vulnerability

theological research is critically called to open the ears of the world for the voices of the coming generations. In this process we are all learners and even always absolute beginners. “What we share with our students, uncomfortably, is the complicated and obscure travail of intimacy with God, the uncanny concrete individual knowledge of the divine whose logic Rahner insurgently encouraged us to respect, the mysterious gift of desolation and consolation that not even the holiest among us can predict, our now passionate, now resigned, now outraged orientation to the uncontainable, the life of grace” (Beaudoin 2008, 74). Practical theological research is an exercise in modesty. So was the comparative endeavor of this article.

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