

YOUTH, CULTURE AND THEOLOGY IN PLURAL
PRESENTING THE WORK OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION
FOR THE STUDY OF YOUTH MINISTRY

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In this paper I want to offer an insight in the history, the actual work and the future vision of the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry (IASYM). Since the beginning of the nineties this association has been growing and becoming more and more important in articulating youth ministry issues in an academic setting. Because many questions, problems and challenges in youth work can be met on a local, regional but also international scale, the exchange of ideas and solutions is of the utmost importance for thousands of reflective practitioners in the field. The bi-annual international conferences in the United Kingdom since 1995, the regional conferences in Africa, Asia and Europe, and the apparition of the scholarly journal since 2002 are important milestones in this process of building a credible academic institution ‘around’ the work of youth ministers. Vital connections are realized between IASYM and other scholarly bodies of reflection in youth ministry. The interesting link with AYME and the participation of the presidents at each other’s conference is a healthy sign of this cooperation.

The word ‘plural’ in the title refers to the radical diversity of contexts, cultures, approaches, ministries and theologies in the field. This diversity is not only enriching for the exchange of ideas between youth ministry representatives internationally, but also deeply refers to the creative and innovative power of young people and their leaders, when they address problems of globalization on a local scale. On further reflection this ‘deep diversity’ could also be theologically relevant: ‘God created humankind, because he loves stories’ (Elie Wiesel). In the storytelling of adolescents, young adults and their ministers, the multifaceted Presence of the Holy in our world can be ‘reflected’ – in the mirror of the human body and soul.

1. Short history of the association

In the early nineties Pete Ward was working as the youth adviser of the Archbishop of Canterbury. He got involved in different youth scenes in the United Kingdom, discussed topics of Christian faith and culture with them, played in their bands and was part of the popular culture surrounding them. More and more he felt the need for a thorough reflection on

his work with youth. Not only the ministerial patterns, the church organization issues and the missionary methods, but also the spiritual ways of ‘doing’ religion and the theological convictions beneath this all puzzled him.¹ He began to gather both reflective practitioners and practical theologians on these topics: how are church and culture interwoven, how is God present in the biographies of postmodern young people, and what kind of research is needed to understand better these difficult dialectics?

The first conference on youth ministry grew out of the discussion of a small group of friends (Dean Borgman, Christine Cook and Pete Ward), who invited people from around the world to meet together in Oxford in 1995, to read their latest work to each other and to discuss it. Around 60 people attended this first gathering. Around 80 people attended the second conference in 1997. In 1999 the proposal for an international academic body was presented and discussed. In the 2001 meeting the foundations were laid for the constitution. On the 9th of January 2003 this constitution was finally accepted in the general assembly in Oxford. This was the official start of the IASYM. In the follow up of Pete Ward, the South-African practical theologian Malan Nel became the first official president. A scholarly journal saw the light in 2002, the ‘Journal of Youth and Theology’ (with the adagium: ‘furthering the study, research and teaching of youth ministry internationally’). In 2005, the British youth ministry researcher Steve Griffiths was appointed to be the new chair person. He stimulated strongly the regional embeddedness of the association and organized conferences in South-Africa and India. In January 2004 the board of IASYM met with several key figures in the world of youth ministry in the USA. A conference was planned for January 2006 in New Orleans, but Katrina decided otherwise... In 2009, the Belgian practical theologian and religious educationalist Bert Roebben was nominated and voted in Cambridge as the new chair. A strong executive committee, supported by three administrative people² and a solid academic board, will keep the association alive and kicking in the next two years. Its website can be found on www.iasym.net.

2. Thematic fields of interest

With the new chair a Roman-Catholic theologian was elected. This is another remarkable point of unity-in-diversity: the association is radically ecumenical. The different confessions within the Christian community are represented, but also the broad horizon of possible positions within these confessions. The perspectives of evangelicals and main stream Christians, both situated within the two great traditions of Catholics and Protestants, provide

¹ In his latest book *Participation and Mediation. A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church*. London, 2008, Pete Ward describes these developments as an ‘auto-theo-biography’, a critical reading of his own spiritual journey in the often opposed worlds of youth ministry and academic theology.

² Jack Gabig (administration), Nick Shepherd (journal) and Andrew Zirschky (communication).

an excellent forum for systematic-theological and practical-theological discussions on youth ministry. In the coming lines I give a personal and non-exhaustive insight in six central topics of this discussion. It is my contention that these form a sort of research agenda for contemporary youth ministry.

2.1. Empirical research on youth

What are the dreams and expectations of young people? How do they react to the global challenges in their vulnerable lives? How does religion play a role in their quest? And how do churches and faith communities respond to this? In order to help young people to find 'life in abundance' (John 10:10), one first need to listen carefully and empathetically to their longings and daily needs. Many young people suffer not only mentally but also physically from the rat races in our days. Large quantitative empirical research has been done recently.³ Interesting qualitative-research goes deeper in the personal reflections of young people on their situation and on the role of religion thereby.⁴ It is a well known secret that lots of youth research does not encompass the spiritual or religious dimension. And it is also a well known secret that precisely practitioners and scholars in religious education and youth ministry are on the forefront of new developments in educational research, praxis and theory. This is in the true sense of the word an interesting paradox...

2.2. Models of youth ministry in the church

The ecclesiological dimension of working with youth in the church can be considered as one of the 'modern' outcomes of the internal differentiation of churches facing contemporary culture. In order to be helpful in reading the signs of the times and to be attractive to the next generations, churches reflect on how they can open up their traditions, institutions and buildings for them. Different models of presence of youth – and their ministers! – inside and outside the church are discussed.⁵ (Partial) membership, believing without belonging and vicarious religion (Grace Davie) need to be reconsidered as the postmodern outcomes of the 'old' modern question of the relationship between faith and culture (H. Richard Niebuhr).⁶ Questions arise, such as: How do young people themselves deal with and respond to the specific offer of the churches, for instance through 'World Youth Days' or Taizé pilgrimages?

³ See e.g. the 'Religion and Life Perspectives' project of the University of Würzburg in Germany and 'Soul Searching' in the United States.

⁴ S. Savage, S. Collins-Mayo & B. Mayo (eds.), *Making Sense of Generation Y. The World of 15-25-year-olds*, London, 2006; S. Dunlop, *Visualising Hope. Exploring the Spirituality of Young People in Central and Eastern Europe*, Cambridge, 2008 (published in the series of YTC-Press of Steve Griffiths).

⁵ B. Roebben, *Seeking Sense in the City. European Perspectives on Religious Education* (Dortmunder Beiträge zur Theologie und Religionspädagogik), Münster/Hamburg/London, 2009, 187-200.

⁶ P. Ward, *Liquid Church*, Peabody (Mass.)/Carlisle (Cumbria), 2002.

How are typical concepts such as the local community and its longstanding tradition challenged by mobility and activity in the world of youth?

2.3. Youth churches and liturgical renewal

In line with these developments the specific phenomenon of youth churches needs further attention. ‘Alternative worship’, ‘emerging churches’ and ‘fresh expressions’ are surprising local phenomena but can also be found on a global scale. Young people construct their own religious and ritual ‘regimes’ and build their own (factual or virtual) congregations.⁷ With their explorations they invent and re-invent the church. The dialectic of tradition and renewal of churches, the idea of the church ‘semper reformanda’ through the living and vibrant presence of young people in its ‘bosom’, will be the theme of the coming European IASYM conference in Norway (7 till 10 April 2010).

2.4. Critical church work with youth

Young people are listening to the voices of passion and responsibility, they are searching for good reasons to ground their hope for a better world, and therefore they are desperately looking for ‘soul food’. Churches cannot and should not leave them behind. Religious traditions and communities should be aware of their quest. Fast answers are not helpful to their slow questions. The German humanist philosopher Jürgen Habermas argues that without the reasonability of faith – the reflected images, stories and practices of the good life provided by religious communities – the good life itself will dry up.⁸ “Without the stories the people will be running wild”, says Dorothee Sölle in her comments on Proverbs 29:18. In this line of thought, youth ministry can be identified with liberation theology. Young people then get the tools to interpret their own precarious situation and to act correspondingly.⁹ New ways of dealing with the dialectic of locality and globalization, of particularity and universality need to be discussed within theology, as was suggested in the title and introduction of this paper. Being somewhere on one particular place implies a sort of ‘slowification’: time to tell stories in order to survive the complexity; revitalise the small stories after the disappearance of the

⁷ For an in depth analysis, see the German example of E. Stams, *Das Experiment Jugendkirche. Die ersten Jahre der Jugendkirche TABGHA in Oberhausen. Eine exemplarische Fallstudie zur Problematik jugendpastorale Neuorientierung* (Praktische Theologie heute 94), Stuttgart, 2008.

⁸ J. Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen. Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 2001*, Frankfurt-am-Main, 2001.

⁹ A strong example of such research can be found in S. Swartz, *Ikasi. The Moral Ecology of South Africa's Township Youth* (dissertation in print). D. White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth. A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach*, Cleveland (OH), 2005, has developed a similar kind of liberation theological approach for the affluent Western world.

grand narratives and in the midst of an overwhelming presence of stories of market and media.¹⁰

2.5. Theology for youth ministry

Not only liberation theology but also other theological constructions are debated in the discourse community of youth ministers. One could say that every kind of theological position has also been tested in youth work. Different options in christology, soteriology and eschatology are dealt with in respect to the lives of young people. Pastoral options are considered in the framework of practical theology, moral aspects are discussed in theological ethics. Congregational studies are used to describe and to improve youth churches and their relationship with the broader community. In this connection with the lives of adolescents and young adults, theology becomes refreshed and vital again.¹¹ Theology is no longer something that needs to be applied to a particular context (e.g. youth work, catechesis, RE in schools, social service, pastoral care, etc.), but has its own rationale and impact – wherever it is used as a tool of interpretation and reflection.

2.6. Youth theology and its impact on theology

The next logical step in this respect is the emergence of a specific and original youth theology. Young people not only device their own churches, rituals and morals, but also create their own theologies. 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”.¹² Theology is a way of living, a way of vision and discernment. It is about critical thinking within an epistemological perspective of faith. Every believer can and should theologize. Every believer is a theologian (according to Karl Rahner). The difference between children, young people and adults, between the ordinary theologian and the academic (professional) theologian is not substantial, but gradual. Every human person has his/her “Eigensinn” or life destination, and has the right and the duty to discover this gradually, also in a theological perspective. Theology should therefore be a democratic enterprise. It cannot and should not be the privilege of religious educators, ministers, theologians or bishops. In my mind, there is a huge resource of fresh theological thinking to be ‘dis-covered’ in the way young people creatively deal with their

¹⁰ In this respect one could argue that there is a huge need for international comparative research – in order to find out how people are ‘doing local theology’ (Clemens Sedmak) in a context of globalisation, what kind of solutions they find locally to deal with the globally.

¹¹ See for instance the work of K. Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*, Grand Rapids (MI), 2004.

¹² P. Ward, *Participation and Mediation* (note 1), 48.

ambivalent questions about God, the world, the other and the self.¹³ It would be interesting to see if there can be made connections to the emerging field of ‘children’s spirituality’ (USA and UK) and ‘Kindertheologie’ (Germany).¹⁴

3. Future challenges for the association

A good research agenda should continuously be open for new developments and challenges. The international, ecumenical and scholarly dimensions of IASYM remind its members of the work that still needs to be done. How is church reshaped when youth are in the picture? What happens with the ‘intra’ of the church when the youth is entering seriously with its ‘extra’ experience? How do they reveal the new meanings and intentions in the ‘development of doctrine’ (John Henry Newman)?¹⁵ What do they learn us about a passionate church? And on the level of society: How can young people help us to meet the deeper layer in education and youth work in a society which has another default – which prefers a market ideology? How can the vulnerability of young people open our eyes for the future of humankind? These questions are open for further reflection. The presence of youth necessarily stimulates ‘furthering the research, study and teaching’, also of youth ministry. Hopefully this stimulus of IASYM as a global association can be expanded to non-English speaking continents, such as Asia, South-America and Africa. As you could imagine, this paper contains also a warm word of welcome to the members of AYME – to become involved in the work of IASYM. You are most welcome to attend the European Norway meeting (April 2010) or the international Pretoria meeting (January 2011), or just visit the association on its website.

¹³ For research on this reflective work with youth and its outcomes as ‘practical culture theology’, see B. Roebben & T. Zondervan, „Und wenn Gott unter uns wäre“. *Praktische Kulturtheologie und die Lebenswelt junger Erwachsener*, in *International Journal of Practical Theology* 12 (2008) 256-273; T. Zondervan (ed.), *Bricolage en bezieling. Over jongeren, cultuur en religie*, Averbode, 2008.

¹⁴ In this approach three ways of dealing with theology is proposed: (1) theology *of* children (listening carefully and empathetically to their religious language, the way they understand revelation and Gods presence in the world); (2) theology *with* children (help them in finding good questions and solid appropriate answers); (3) theology *for* children (show the courage of one’s own convictions as an educator and tell them about the solid answers him/herself has found); see F. Schweitzer, *Was ist und wozu Kindertheologie?* in *Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie* 2 (2003) 9-18.

¹⁵ B. Roebben, *Seeking Sense in the City* (note 5), 201-217.