

# God in Youth Worship

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## 1. Introduction

During the period from 2007 to 2012 we conducted our practical theological study of the participation of adolescents in youth worship in Protestant contexts.<sup>1</sup> The actor perspective of adolescents is the central perspective in our study and therefore also in this article.<sup>2</sup> One of our main questions, which is the central question in this article, is: how is God mediated in youth worship and interpreted by adolescents? In youth worship words are spoken to God and about God: he is addressed, proclaimed and discussed. Both discursive practices and embodied practices matter in the mediation. In the interviews the topic of the relationship between God and the participants is either mentioned ‘spontaneously’ or is prompted by the researchers because of their questions. Furthermore, God seems to be mediated in ritual enactments. We will approach the topic of God and youth worship from the perspective of adolescents who are more or less affiliated to the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN), who are between fifteen and twenty years old and who participate in local youth worship services and/or in national youth worship events. To answer the question of this article the following sub questions are asked:

1. What can we say about how God is mediated in ritual enactments in youth worship, primarily based upon the participant observations by the researcher?

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<sup>2</sup> We make use of the ethnographic methods of participant observations, in-depth interviews, speed interviews, conversations, written sources, taking pictures, and videos.

2. What do adolescents say about God in youth worship? We consider interviews and conversations, i.e. 'participants' accounts',<sup>3</sup> as both resource and topic. 'They can be read for what they tell us about the phenomena to which they refer' and 'we can analyze them in terms of the perspectives they imply, the discursive strategies they employ, and even the psychosocial dynamics they suggest.'<sup>4</sup> In our (ontological) point of view, worship practices include the speech acts of adolescents and the way adolescents appropriate what takes place in youth worship. We consider the data of interviews and conversations as primer data. Therefore, in this article the data yielded by interviewing are important.
3. What can be said from a theological perspective about these observations and interpretations? Thus, we theologically reflect on our descriptions and analyses of how God is mediated in youth worship and interpreted by adolescents. The constructing role of the researchers comes to the fore in answering all three questions.

The youth worship gatherings involved in this study are thirteen local youth worship services in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN). The local youth worship gatherings take place in different churches with different theological backgrounds. After the service we had a small group interview with two to six participants. Not only local worship but also five youth worship events with a national or international character are involved. For practical reasons, as well as to receive more extensive interviews, we interviewed individual adolescents after the event. The events are: X-MAS Proof of the PCN, EO youth day (twice), XNOIZZ Flevo Festival and Taizé Europe in Rotterdam. The local youth worship gatherings consist of small groups of adolescents or in bigger assemblies with adults too. In some gatherings the connection with the liturgical tradition of the congregations remains: greeting at the beginning, prayers, scripture readings, sermon, confession et cetera. There are also gatherings which have more discontinuity with the 'regular' service in their forms: creative aspects, different music songs, dialogues during the service et cetera. The events have their own tradition: the Taizé event stands in another theological and spiritual tradition than the EO youth day. We are not elaborating on these differences, but focus on interpretations of adolescents of God in youth worship and the importance of embodied and discursive practices in all the gatherings.

We will start with some reflections concerning the theological question. Then, on the basis of the empirical data (mainly derived from participant observations and interviews), answers to the question how is God mediated in youth worship and interpreted by adolescents will be provided. This article will end with a

<sup>3</sup> M. HAMMERSLEY & P. ATKINSON: *Ethnography. Principles in practice* (New York 2007<sup>3</sup>) 97.

<sup>4</sup> HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON: *Ethnography* 97.

reflection on how the various groups may be challenged in their worship. Here the pragmatic task of practical theology comes to the fore.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Liturgical-ritual enactments and God

The question is to God in youth worship. God who reveals himself cannot be empirically investigated. The relationship between empirical phenomena and God (metaphysics) is at stake in this research.<sup>6</sup> We will discuss this in line with Long who finds an answer to the question of the how of the referential character of language in the 'engaged ego'<sup>7</sup> and in line with Korpel and De Moor who suggest that divine speech and divine silence have to be interpreted against the background of human discourse.<sup>8</sup>

As a prolegomenon it may be stated: without God no worship. Theologically speaking 'God must come in action to constitute knowledge of God'.<sup>9</sup> The enactments<sup>10</sup> in youth worship in and through which God, according to our theological prolegomenon, communicates and reveals himself, can however be

<sup>5</sup> R.R. OSMER: *Practical theology. An introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI 2008). He speaks of the descriptive-empirical task (what is going on), the interpretive task (why is it going on), the normative task (what ought to be going on) and the pragmatic task (how might we respond). In this article the first, the second and the fourth are present.

<sup>6</sup> There are various possible approaches to be distinguished regarding the relationship between empirical phenomena and God / metaphysics. Two approaches are often opposed in debates. An analytical philosophical point of view that explains the referential nature of language that refers to an external reality in concepts and meanings, e.g. A. PLANTINGA: *Does God have a nature?* (Milwaukee 1980) 18-22. It leads to an extensive epistemological and linguistic debate. An empirical-hermeneutical point of view argues that we only know how people speak about God and their interpretations given to God, but that this knowledge does not simply imply knowledge about God himself; J. VAN DER VEN: *Practical theology. An empirical approach* (Kampen 1993); S.A. BROWN: 'Hermeneutical theory', in B. J. MILLER-MCLEMORE (ed.): *The Wiley Blackwell companion to practical theology* (Malden, MA 2012) 112-122. It is not always clear if and how the empirical and philosophical hermeneutic approach turn to metaphysics.

<sup>7</sup> This term is used in M. BARNARD, J. CILLIERS, & C. WEPENER: *Worship in the network culture. Liturgical ritual studies. Fields and methods, concepts and metaphors* (= Liturgia Condenda 28) (Leuven/Paris/Walpole 2014) 157; it refers to D.S. LONG: 'Making sense of Christian worship. Language, truth, and metaphysics', in *Liturgy* 25/2 (2009) 62-91, p.64-65.

<sup>8</sup> M. KORPEL & J. DE MOOR: *The silent God* (Leiden / Boston 2011) 66.

<sup>9</sup> G. VAN DER BRINK & C. VAN DER KOOI: *Christelijke dogmatiek* (Zoetermeer 2012) 50. Translation RS.

<sup>10</sup> Grimes distinguishes enactment from performances. The latter is doing something in front of an audience. We follow Grimes when he explains 'to enact is not only to do something in front of someone, but also to put into force. (...) enacting a ritual can set things in motion'; R.L. GRIMES: *The craft of ritual studies* (New York 2014) 243.

investigated. By emphasizing this relationship between enactment and God, openness is created: not only the Christian practices or the worshipping subjects are object of study, but due to our position we understand these practices and practitioners as revealing something of God. We consider this perspective on God as the background perspective or our ontological position, while the practice itself is the fore ground perspective. Ward rightly explains that 'through exercise of theological reflection practical theology may be focused on the social and cultural forms of faith but it is simultaneously seeking God in and through these things.'<sup>11</sup> He emphasizes the spiritual dimension of practical theology and describes theology as a participation in God.

As mentioned before, Long localizes an answer on the referential character of language, which means a connection between empirical phenomena and metaphysics, in the 'engaged ego'. The focus is on the use that the words have in everyday life. From a metaphysical point of view, Long emphasizes that words in real situations include a 'more'. For participants, the bread in liturgy is more than just bread, because they recognize the more of language that 'signifies a *res* that exceeds the predication'.<sup>12</sup> In liturgy our (discursive and embodied) language or practices evoke a reality that is 'more than its context would suggest. It involves our life in God's such that we now perform actions that would otherwise be unintelligible.'<sup>13</sup> Long refers to Wittgenstein for whom truth is not a matter of detachment, but of engagement, 'the kind of engagement love entails'.<sup>14</sup>

The conclusions of *The silent God*, the study by Korpel and De Moor, also appear to explain, that to know the truth of God engaged egos are necessary, although these authors use other terminology and speak for instance of witnesses or messengers.<sup>15</sup> They suggest that divine speech and divine silence have to be interpreted against the background of human discourse.<sup>16</sup> They explain in their study that revelation of God is an interactive process in which God and people meet and cooperate.<sup>17</sup> In this process, the human mediators in the ancient world did not regard themselves as equals of God but as messengers, they say. This means, however, actively participating in God's work on earth rather than waiting.<sup>18</sup> When we systematically speak of God and people, key words like revelation, faith and church (in our particular study a worship community) come in. These words are distinguishable but cannot be separated, and both

<sup>11</sup> P. WARD: *Participation and mediation. A practical theology for the liquid church* (London 2008) 102.

<sup>12</sup> LONG: 'Christian worship' 70.

<sup>13</sup> LONG: 'Christian worship' 70.

<sup>14</sup> LONG: 'Christian worship' 65; L. WITTGENSTEIN: *Culture and value* 33.

<sup>15</sup> KORPEL & DE MOOR: *The silent God* 289-297.

<sup>16</sup> KORPEL & DE MOOR: *The silent God* 66.

<sup>17</sup> KORPEL & DE MOOR: *The silent God* 284.

<sup>18</sup> KORPEL & DE MOOR: *The silent God* 284.

God and people dynamically interact in these. 'Revelation as a free divine activity is an objective category, but it is also a very subjective category of the recognition of revelation in human experience that decides whether the free offer of divine grace will be accepted.'<sup>19</sup> Faith is an answer from people, but is also a matter of God. In church faith acquires a collective dimension. Again human effort and God's interest intersect. From our theological background we emphasize God's initiative in this intersection.

To answer the question whether the ritual-enactments and the interpretations say something of God, the engaged egos who act ritually, restate, remember and speak are important keys. But the epistemology based upon 'engaged egos' is not only a matter of adolescents but also of researchers. Witnessing takes place at the level of the constructions by adolescents and by the researcher. From an epistemological perspective interpretations in human communication and its references to God are taken seriously, however, not as a direct uncritical link to the metaphysics but in a critical way. The following quote points to parameters of this critical way:<sup>20</sup>

The integrity of witnesses must always be tested, first of all by critical and honest self-examination, then by observing the witness' attitude towards others, and finally by comparing the testimony to what has been accepted as words of God by previous generations.

### 3. How God is mediated. Embodied and discursive practices

In formerly published, accepted or submitted articles of this research project the multifaceted participation of adolescents in various practices of youth worship is described. These articles elaborate on how youth worship gatherings are shaped,<sup>21</sup> the importance of learning dimensions,<sup>22</sup> the crux of recreational aspects<sup>23</sup> and of being together with peers and others.<sup>24</sup> In particular the latter

<sup>19</sup> F. ŠTĚCH: 'Fundamental theology, dynamics of Christian life and identity', in *ET Studies. Journal of the European society for Catholic theology* 5/1 (2014) 77-95, p.86.

<sup>20</sup> KORPEL & DE MOOR: *The silent God* 298; 'The integrity of witnesses' is an important category of revelation in the New Testament, cf. J. FIRET: *Dynamics in pastoring* (Grand Rapids, MI 1986, translation of *Het agogisch moment in het pastoraal optreden* (Kampen 1968)) 39-40.

<sup>21</sup> P.M. SONNENBERG, M. NEL, A. DE KOCK & M. BARNARD: 'Shaping youth worship. Modes of active participation' (submitted).

<sup>22</sup> P.M. SONNENBERG & M. BARNARD: 'Educating adolescents through Christian youth worship. Reclaiming space for learning in liturgical context', in: *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68/2 (2012), Art. #1111, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v68i2.1111>.

<sup>23</sup> P.M. SONNENBERG & M. BARNARD: 'Youth worship as recreation', in: *International journal for practical theology* (in press).

three articles also explain that these qualities of 'learning', 'recreation' and 'being together' include expressions of faith, and experiences of faith and God. God and faith are, for example, experienced in the community or in the music performance, the relation to God is expressed in these, or in the silence of the prayer. Adolescents also learn about faith and God in youth worship for example, in the reading of the Scripture, or in the sermon. God and faith are connected for adolescents to the performances. God is mediated in ritual enactments. This article explains how God can be encountered in youth worship and that words, acts and substances play a role in this. The main perspective in this article is the reflection by adolescents, though this section three is in particular based upon the participant observations and our reflections on these. Firstly, the notion of combinations of embodied and discursive practices that mediate God will be mentioned. Secondly, we will distinguish the practices of addressing, proclaiming and discussing God which are important in the mediation of God. We approach them in first instance as a discursive practice, but will not deny the embodied aspects of it. Thirdly, the discursive and embodied practices will be connected with the theory of canonical words of Rappaport. The need for the Bible, as well as the importance of substantial representation in youth worship will be highlighted.

### 3.1. Embodied and discursive practices

For many adolescents youth worship and its liturgical-rituals shape their mood for knowing and experiencing God. The liturgical-rituals 'performatively allow an embedding of the presence of the holy'.<sup>25</sup> God is mediated in youth worship or, with slightly more emphasis on God as actor, God works through interpersonal communications and performances.<sup>26</sup> Adolescents participate in youth worship: they express themselves and join expressions of others. A possible effect of this is that they are triggered by 'God'. This occurs in different ways, as we noticed in the empirical data; embodied practices and discursive practices mediate God. The following example explains how embodied and discursive practices are intertwined and also strengthen each other.

At the EO youth day, the artist Michael W. Smith encourages the young people by proclaiming: 'Revival is coming. The movement of God is coming to Holland. Faith is rising tonight'<sup>27</sup> to which the adolescents react by applauding. Apparently they feel part of this faith and of this happening, as also becomes clear in the interviews. It is not only this phrase that puts them into action. The crowdedness of the event encourages adolescents, as well. The encouraging phrase fits in the atmosphere of being together 'with so many Christians' and

<sup>24</sup> P.M. SONNENBERG, M. NEL, A. DE KOCK & M. BARNARD: 'Being together in youth worship' (submitted).

<sup>25</sup> BARNARD, CILLIERS & WEPENER: *Worship and the network culture* 338.

<sup>26</sup> IMMINK: *Faith* 133.

<sup>27</sup> Field notes EO youth day 2009.

would not have the same effect in a small group at a Sunday afternoon. The immensity of the event, being together ‘with so many Christians’, being silent as a crowd, etcetera communicate for adolescents something of the greatness and power of God, as they describe.

### 3.2. Addressing, proclaiming, discussing God

The mediation of God occurs in different ways of discursive language of God, namely addressing God, e.g. in prayers and songs, and proclaiming or discussing God. Mentioning God or Jesus in liturgy is not a ‘constative’ but a ‘performative’.<sup>28</sup> He is spoken of and addressed as an actor, and participants are called to a certain action or motion: to hope, to trust, to tell, to gain knowledge etcetera. These discursives are said in a certain setting, with a certain expression and intonation. They are not merely discursive.

In a prayer, a youth leader starts her prayer of intercession by saying: ‘You [= God] know people’, ‘You love people’, and ‘You are close to them’. She connects these qualities with the needs of some adolescents. ‘Lord, I thank you that you know us as we are. (...) that you know exactly what bothers us and that your loving eyes are on us. (...) I want to pray that you are close to the young people who may think of themselves as inferior (...)’. Besides feelings of inferiority, other problems that young people face are mentioned: problems in relationships, broken families, exploring their sexual orientation, a time when faith does not mean anything to them. Time is taken for this prayer, and adolescents appreciate the style and content.<sup>29</sup>

The youth leader intentionally or not brings participants into a certain mood. The words, silence, intonation etcetera may ‘function as *triggers* [italics by RS] with which to bring people into a mood in which the presence of God is experienced’.<sup>30</sup> For the respondents in the congregation in the example above, the entire shared focus of the assembly addresses God, and in particular the embodied and discursive practice of the prayer and the music do.

We briefly mention the proclamation of God which is an important act in the majority of the involved gatherings. This takes place in sermons, but also in speeches by artists and in introductions of prayer moments. The appropriation of speech acts in youth worship is equivocal. Some adolescents in a small group

<sup>28</sup> The theory on enactment (cf. note 10) is in studies of speech acts known as a ‘performative’: a speech act with consequences in a reality beyond the description or constative; J.L. AUSTIN: *How to do things with words* (Oxford 1980<sup>2</sup>) 6; R. RAPPAPORT: *Ritual and religion in the making of humanity* (Cambridge 1999) 113-115. ‘...it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action’; AUSTIN: *How to do things* 6; Smart speaks of ‘re-enactment’ to express the element of being set in motion, N. SMART: *The concept of worship* (London) 27.

<sup>29</sup> Field notes local youth worship G, 04.03.2007.

<sup>30</sup> J. ROELAND: Selfation. *Dutch evangelical youth between subjectivization and subjection* (Amsterdam 2009) 148.

appreciate, for example, the clear language and appeals of what to do.<sup>31</sup> But there are also critical comments about this appealing style in the same small group. For one respondent<sup>32</sup> the focus in the service was too much on the action of adolescents, namely the call for worshipping God, for conversion, for joining the community, and the focus was too little on the greatness of God and what he says. Although the minister in his sermon tried to emphasize this latter as well, and proclaimed God's fidelity and guiding, the respondent did not appropriate that element. This respondent points to two perspectives: who God is and what people (should) do or who they are. We may say that both perspectives are intrinsically related and, as such, are important ingredients of proclamations. In the discursive practices the links to the own lives and languages of the participants are crucial. In proclamations in youth worship an affirmative approach is often dominant: our God listens to us and will be there for us, that is the message.

'God' is not only addressed and proclaimed but also discussed by adolescents. Conversations may help adolescents to express and build their views and experiences. They may build theological knowledge of the relationship between God and mankind, including religious and social-ethical applications.<sup>33</sup> To summarize: addressing, proclaiming and discussing God mediate God when there are links to the lives of adolescents, when who God is and what people do or who they are, both receive attention, and when adolescents take part in the mediation themselves, either actively in the discussions or in appropriating what is said and acted.

### 3.3. The canonical Word, the community and atmosphere

Adolescents themselves point to the Bible as one of the elements related to how God is mediated in youth worship. In some youth worship gatherings the Scripture reading is absent or hardly gets any attention. Most gatherings, however, connect the central theme of the gathering to the Bible.

The Bible brings the factor 'time' into the worship. God's deeds in the past, the present and the future of his promise are represented. The anthropologist Rappaport explains that this relation to time mainly (not exclusively) occurs through words:<sup>34</sup>

Whereas acts and substances represent substantially that which is present, the word of liturgy can connect that which is present to the past, or even to the beginning of time, and to the future, or even to time's end (...) Because of their symbolic quali-

<sup>31</sup> Interview small group local youth worship G, 13.01.2008.

<sup>32</sup> Girl, sixteen years old, local youth worship G, 13.01.2008.

<sup>33</sup> This distinction is explained in SONNENBERG & BARNARD: 'Educating adolescents through Christian youth worship'.

<sup>34</sup> RAPPAPORT: *Ritual and religion* 152.



ty, this is to say, invariant words easily escape from the here and now and thus can represent felicitously the canonical, which is never confined to the here and now.

The canonical biblical word includes the time factors: past, present and future. The church 'participates in the *witness* about Jesus Christ'.<sup>35</sup> It is about actualizing. 'We are *actualizing* the past event, making it present so that the saving power of Christ can be made available to the worshiper in the here and now.'<sup>36</sup> This actualizing is a complex connection between the canonical word and the situation of the adolescents. This word dimension creates openness for adolescents to position themselves in a time perspective, in the history of God with humankind. This positioning includes questions adolescents have about the future, choices to be made, and questions about tradition.

Rappaport, among many others,<sup>37</sup> also emphasizes the importance of the non-discursive language in symbolic acting.<sup>38</sup> Acts and objects represent substantially that what is present, Rappaport points to in the aforementioned quote. These are present not in relation to 'time' but to 'substance'. The 'substantial' representation of God (others speak of 'iconic' representation)<sup>39</sup> for adolescents lies in particular in the Christian community itself.<sup>40</sup> 'Faith must be shared to find confirmation in the community of faith.'<sup>41</sup> God is experienced in the community that comes together. The substantial representations also rest in the great worship (music) atmospheres in which God is experienced.<sup>42</sup> These substances represent (something of) God for many adolescents. This is in particular experienced in terms of feeling, like feeling something of the Spirit in the music. We name the music performances here under the heading of non-discursive, but add that the music in particular is a practice in which the embodied and the discursive practice combine. God is experienced in music by word, rhythm, tune, and visuals.

In speaking about God and substance, the sacraments and sacramental perspectives often come up in the literature of liturgical studies (cf. note 37). How-

<sup>35</sup> M. NEL: *Youth ministry. An inclusive congregational approach* (Pretoria 2000) 80.

<sup>36</sup> J.D. CRICHTON: 'A theology of worship', in C. JONES et al. (eds.): *The study of liturgy* (London 1992) 15.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. for example: D. BROWN: *God & grace of body. Sacrament in ordinary* (Oxford 2007); T. SAMPLE: *The spectacle of worship in a wired world. Electronic culture and the gathered people of God* (Nashville 1998); BARNARD, CILLIERS & WEPENER: *Worship in the network culture* 325-330. Indications in acts and matters are in literature often theologically interpreted in a sacramental frame as these literature references do explain as well.

<sup>38</sup> RAPPAPORT: *Ritual and religion* 143.

<sup>39</sup> BARNARD, CILLIERS & WEPENER: *Worship in the network culture* 343-345.

<sup>40</sup> This is further explained in the article 'Being together in youth worship'. This article is submitted.

<sup>41</sup> KORPEL & DE MOOR: *The silent God* 70.

<sup>42</sup> The importance of a stirring (music) atmosphere is further explained in SONNENBERG & BARNARD: 'Youth worship as recreation'.

ever, in the worship gatherings in our study were, with one exception, no sacraments. Various reasons can be mentioned in different contexts. We now suffice with the remark that the relationship between youth (worship) and sacraments calls for some reconsideration.

## 4. How God is interpreted by adolescents

In the interview data adolescents mention God. They interpret the relationship between God and worship and reflect on themselves as worshipers. Two lines of explicit interpretations of God and worship by adolescents are identified: 'God is present' and 'God is a question'. The third line of interpretation does not connect God and worship. We call this line of interpretation 'God?'.

### 4.1. God is present

There are utterances of adolescents with an emphasis on convictions of God's presence. They declare that he 'is present'. This is often connected with the assurance that the respondents intentionally worship him. Their worship is *pro Deo*. This *pro Deo* element is presented by some as a fact, but for others it is an experienced reality. They explain that they want to praise God and to offer the entire worship event to him. At one event it was also possible to take part in a ritual to express your choice for and commitment to God. In this category 'God is present', God seems to be a motivation for participation, but conversely, experiencing of or orientating to God is also a result of participating in youth worship.

Some respondents from this group with a 'God's presence-centered' interpretation speak of an emotional and physical experience of God during a worship gathering. The affective divine experiences are emphasized mainly by adolescents in reformed-orthodox worship,<sup>43</sup> especially during events such as the EO youth day (a youth day of the Dutch evangelical broadcasting company) or XNOIZZ Flevo Festival (a youth day organized by Youth for Christ, in cooperation with the EO and the youth organization of the PCN). Emotional experiences and 'being touched' is, for them, connected to God's presence, as the following quote shows: 'For me, this day is connected to God, because he is with us, and he supports us in faith and in helping each other. On such a day, I have the feeling that God is closer than usual, although it is not true, but I experience it as such.'<sup>44</sup> This affective terminology is also there when adolescents give negative answers to questions about the relationship between worship and faith: 'In worship, it's about God, but it doesn't feel like that to me.'<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Often with an evangelical stream concerning youth worship.

<sup>44</sup> Boy, seventeen years old, EO youth day, 21.06.2009.

<sup>45</sup> Boy, fourteen years old, local youth worship E, 08.02.2007.

Emotional experience is based on both embodied and discursive liturgical-ritual enactments as is explained in the following quote:<sup>46</sup>

Sanne: I think I experience the Holy Spirit more in revival songs (Dutch: *Opwekking*), because, in revival songs, I feel what I am singing. The text of the revivals is clear to me, and I sing from my heart. This feeling I absolutely do not have with psalms and hymns. There, I just sing along, but it does not come from the heart. I tried to understand the text of the psalms and hymns several times, but I find them boring and difficult.

The presence of God is often explained in terms like ‘he is there for you’ and ‘he leads you’. The focus is on God who is present to us; on his action and coming towards people. In the communication between God and humankind, the (descended) movement from God to the individual or assembly is considered crucial by adolescents. The following phrases and quotations, for example, point this out: ‘he helps you’, ‘he guides you’, ‘he is with us and supports us’, and ‘he offers himself for you’. A more extensive quote is the following: ‘Then you just feel, you really feel, how do you say it, kind of like a tickle, (...) As if the Lord himself comes over, so to speak. Like you feel it by communicating through music, and by doing that in a praising way.’<sup>47</sup> Especially at the events, the power and greatness of God is experienced in the immensity of the event and the music experience. Both the greatness of God’s power and of his love and care is reflected on by adolescents, but to use a distinction of R. Otto,<sup>48</sup> in general the experience of the *fascinans* (of his love and care, overflowing affection) is dominant in the reflections over the *tremendum*, the ‘object of fear’ (awe, acknowledgment of God’s majesty, overriding power, and energetic experience of the mystery of a totally different and completely strange God).<sup>49</sup> The latter, in particular God’s majesty and power, we notice in some lyrics which adolescents appreciate: lyrics about God’s Kingdom and majesty. In their reflections experiences of God’s greatness or power are mentioned in relation to adoring and praising. Or to give another example pointing in the direction of God’s power: a respondent chooses the symbol of a wave of water to explain what the day meant to him ‘a wave that gives power. The power of God’s Spirit is given. In the New Testament is written about this power (...) which works in you.’<sup>50</sup> Reflecting on God as a different ‘other’ becomes visible in the following. In a conversation about Christian music a girl reacts: ‘I do not like it when about the Lord is spoken like he is, uhm, like he is equal to, equal to everyone. I don’t think it is like that.’ Her boyfriend adds ‘that he is your friend you mean.’ ‘Yes’

<sup>46</sup> Girl, fifteen years old, EO youth day, 02.07.2009.

<sup>47</sup> Boy, seventeen years old, EO youth day, 08.08.2012.

<sup>48</sup> R. OTTO: *The idea of the Holy* (New York 1970, originally published 1917) 5-7, 37-38, 140-141.

<sup>49</sup> OTTO: *The idea of the Holy* 12-30, 37-38.

<sup>50</sup> Boy, sixteen years old, EO youth day, 16.06.2012.

she says.<sup>51</sup> Opposed to *fascinans* is *tremendum*, but in the analysis of our data we distinguish other lines of interpretations, namely God is present and the quest of God. We will continue with this latter interpretation.

#### 4.2. God is a question

Some adolescents do not connect worship to the presence of God, neither in their convictions nor in affective terminology, or they speak hesitatingly: 'I doubt whether God exists', or 'But I don't really think something like: God is with me now. I find that very hard to believe.' Or to give more extensive quotes:

Interviewer: Does what you did and experienced at X-MAS Proof have any relationship with God for you?

Pete: I am not a strict believer who is very sure of the existence of God. I still have a lot of doubts (...) God had actual little to do with it [= the event, RS], although I do feel nice when the atmosphere is good. Perhaps that is the influence of God?<sup>52</sup>

Interviewer: How do you describe yourself as believer?

Jos: I see myself as a seeker. I'm still not sure of the existence of God. I do believe in something and hope that God can fill this missing link. My faith relies primarily on the love for others and on the care for each other. Also high on my list is accepting each other as people. I have clearly seen this in Taizé, amongst all the people.<sup>53</sup>

These people with a quest towards God participate in youth worship, but act less than the first group with an explicit orientation to God. For some the doubt goes to unbelief, for others the orientation is more indecisive. Questions like whether there is a good alternative or whether life without God is possible are raised.

In the reflection on God and worship by adolescents, the emphasis is on his presence and existence, both positively and negatively. In general, the notions of doubt about the presence or existence of God are more dominant in the mainline setting.<sup>54</sup> This observation is a first provisional explanation of the why of the interpretations of adolescents. However, there are nuances. In the same youth group, a personal connection with God can be observed, as well as a more distant or hesitant connection.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Girl, nineteen years old, EO youth day, 13.06.2012.

<sup>52</sup> Boy, seventeen years old, X-MAS Proof, 23.12.2008.

<sup>53</sup> Boy, nineteen years old, Taizé, 01.01.2011.

<sup>54</sup> Or 'middle stream' or ecumenical Protestant. In those streams open spiritual approaches are mixed and there is place for both confessional and liberal contents.

<sup>55</sup> Especially in congregation E (dates 04.02.2007, 04.11.2007) and at the event X-MAS Proof (2008).

Furthermore, adolescents (like adults) do not have a coherent framework with regard to how God is, and how humankind relates to him. In their worship practices indecisive and discordant points of view exist. For people, worship, including reflecting on it, is an exercise, an attempt and an experience. A good example is the following: in an interview, an eighteen year-old girl explains that because of the move to another congregation, she became aware that many more people doubt whether God exists, like herself. Later on, when the conversation is about Sunday in relation to Monday, she says:<sup>56</sup>

Yahweh means: I am there for you. That is a sermon that I want to use. I am there for you is an offer. Therefore, I go to church. From that perspective, I do things: helping people, youth work. This is mostly unconscious, that you do things for others. But I think it is a very nice philosophy [to offer yourself to others, RS].

Here, we see a girl, of whom we know that she was confirmed in the PCN, who expresses doubt concerning the existence of God and recognizes this in her peers, but at the same time she searches for orientation in life in relation to God, probably in connection to a particular sermon she once heard.

We quoted a boy just before, who is unsure of the presence of God, but at the same time hopes that God himself fills the missing link. Furthermore, he likes revival songs, because of the rhythm. Generally, the lyrics of these songs are not particularly typical of a quest. The interpretation of a quest is clear when someone explains in an interview that he doubts the existence of God, but the same boy speaks in a conversation during the worship, as we noticed in our participant observations, of the help of God.<sup>57</sup> The following two quotations show an active process of moving between ‘God is a question’ and ‘God is present’ in the sense that he exists, which appears to be a central question for adolescents. A girl, in her search for God, grows in her conviction that God does not exist. When in the youth worship it is about God, it does not hold her interest very much. At the same time, faith in the existence of God is difficult to let go of:<sup>58</sup>

Renske: Because I think it is scary to let go of something so familiar, [= existence of God, RS], but it is also scary to embrace it fully. I’m not like that. (...) Yes, but, I don’t know, I’m slowly getting used to that. Other things are taking the place of faith, such as discussions with friends, or my parents, not specifically about faith, but, well, yeah, faith sort of gives meaning to one’s existence, we talk about that kind of things.(...) Still, I do notice when people are swearing, or say something negative about God, than I feel I have to defend Him. (...) Yes, that’s the same feeling I have when I just said that my little sister is real stupid, but no-one else can say that! (...) Yes, it’s your roots, as well. And also your parents, I mean, my par-

<sup>56</sup> Girl, eighteen years old, local youth worship gathering R, 22.04.2007.

<sup>57</sup> Boy, twenty years old, local youth worship gathering Z, 02.12.2012, field notes 02.12.2007.

<sup>58</sup> Girl, nineteen years old, local youth worship gathering Z, 02.12.2007.

ents do often go to church, it's like they're bashing your parents when they're being negative about it. I don't think others should believe in God, but they should be respectful.

A boy tells us, in answer on the question why he was confirmed, that he did not really believe in God, but was searching for answers on why people exist, etcetera. He says that it was a process in which the youth work and the youth leader played an important role. At one point when he joined some people of the church youth work in a theater event, he experienced God and at that time he knew that God exists:<sup>59</sup>

Jan-Willem: I was just thinking a bit about faith, especially about statements that I heard during recent months. People who said things to me, and, at one point, I had a religious (God) experience, and I became very warm, and I was sure that God does exist. He was with me, and said: 'You've said so many times, when you exist, show yourself.' Many times I called out: 'If you exist, then it should not be so hard to show yourself.' I mean, with God, I think like, He is omnipotent, I mean, it should not be so hard for him to make it just clear to me that he is there. (...). So I said many times: 'If you are there, show yourself.' And there, He did so. He said like 'Here I am'. ( ... ) I had a religious experience, very warm. A kind of voice in my head that said: 'Here I am, and I exist. Do with this as you like.'

#### 4.3. God?

The respondents of the two categories – 'God is present' and 'God as a question' – consciously think of God, humankind and faith when reflecting on worship. These interpretations prove an active and conscious positioning toward God. There is also a group of adolescents who 'just' participate without consciously or intentionally positioning toward God during the youth worship. 'It is just cozy' to them. Their positioning to God might be considered a bit passive. This does not necessarily mean that God does not matter at all for them, but they do not actively approach this relationship between God and worship. This can be explicitly mentioned by adolescents, like in the following quotation. In a small group, adolescents speak of the relationship to God and worship after a question from the researcher. The conversation becomes a bit stilted. It shows different interpretations of adolescents. It ends with a girl who primarily participates because of the fun:<sup>60</sup>

Interviewer: You, Erik, mentioned at the beginning: you come together for God. What do you mean?

<sup>59</sup> Boy, nineteen years old, XNOIZZ Flevo Festival 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Small group young adolescents, fourteen-fifteen years old, local congregation E, 08.02.2007.

Erik: In such celebrations you do nothing but ... in the Bible you talk about God, and, actually, if you sing or pray, you actually do so for God. This is the case for me at least.

Emke: Compared to other [regular, RS] services, well, you're actually there for God, who stands above you, sort of. Here, in the youth church, that you have discussions about God together, that He is in the middle.(...)

Interviewer: You may also find that it does not have anything to do with God.

Esther: Depends, no, I do not know.

Eva: I think the same as Emke said.

Interviewer: In the middle. You experience it that way?

Erik: At that moment, you experience that?! (laughter from the group) No, I am serious.

Eva: No, I do not feel that.

Interviewer: but you know this, or...

Eva: No, I do not have all those thoughts, I did not, I just think it's fun.

This line of interpretation does not only link to explicit utterances of adolescents like Eva. We also involve moments in this line of interpretation that respondents speak of a connection to God, but that we got the impression that it was mainly mentioned because of a question of the researcher, that we got the well-known desirable answer, and not so much an own reaction with regard to their participation. The formal reactions or the forced way of reacting on this question gave us some indications for this conclusion. For some adolescents it may also be difficult or impossible to answer the question how they experienced liturgical aspects to be related to faith or God. We will return to this in the final section.

## **5. God in youth worship. Critical discussion and stimuli for the practice**

How is God mediated in youth worship and interpreted by youth? We want to acknowledge both the 'metaphysical' reality of God as actor and the constructing role of people in the actions and the interpretation of the worship. We briefly reflect on the distinguished interpretations, first on 'God is mediated' (5.1), then we summarize how God is interpreted by adolescents. This will be positioned in relation to two Dutch quantitative studies (5.2). Finally, we discuss how the various groups of adolescents may be further stimulated in their worshipping in relation to God (5.3).

### **5.1. God is mediated**

The entire liturgical ritual gives space to the communication between God and humankind. As such, for adolescents youth worship is a place to find God. God is mediated in embodied and discursive practices. In line with Fieret the

emphasis might be placed on the coming of God. Firet elaborates on the coming of God in his Word.<sup>61</sup> The Word is not just a word, coming occurs. As mentioned before, for adolescents the presence of God is not only experienced in the discursive but also in acts and substances in youth worship in which a good atmosphere and being together as Christians are important ingredients. In youth worship, combinations of words and acts or substances matter, in these God is mediated. In the literature, a one sided emphasis on the word is corrected by a one sided emphasis on shapes and embodied subjectivity.<sup>62</sup> It is important to keep the two together. Furthermore, we take in mind that in youth liturgy words, acts and substances are embedded in a concrete setting and that as such they are empirical phenomena but also open to a metaphysical or a theological 'more' because they engage participants and because of engagement of participants.<sup>63</sup>

## 5.2. How God is mentioned. A variety of interpretations

Different studies come with a variety of conceptualizations of God by young people. Synchronicity in the conceptualizing is lacking. A recent quantitative Dutch research by De Hart concludes that young people, who are between seventeen and thirty years old, who are positively connected to the church and who visit the Sunday morning services (PCN/RCC) have developed, since the mid-1990s, more orthodox opinions concerning God, the Bible and the church.<sup>64</sup> That is to say, they are more committed to the rules of the church, the Bible is considered as the Word of God, Jesus as the Son of God, and heaven and hell are perceived as realities. The explanation for this in terms of hard-core effect and the influence of evangelism is not enough, De Hart concludes.<sup>65</sup> The interpretations of God and worship of our respondents vary. Orthodox views are present. However, our more or less church related respondents cannot all be taken in the category of orthodox believers. In particular the line of interpretations of 'God is a question' points in a different direction.

In her quantitative research among young people of the age of thirteen and eighteen, whose parents are member of the church (PCN/RCC), De Boer speaks of a middle position of her respondents concerning the image of God: some claim there is 'something', but this is not necessarily the God of the Bible, oth-

<sup>61</sup> FIRET: *Dynamics in pastoring* 39-40. The word of God is (a.) the form of the Lord's presence, (b.) the revelation of the name, (c.) the revelation of the truth; *Ibidem* 15-23.

<sup>62</sup> For a further elaborations see A. DE KOCK & P.M. SONNENBERG: 'Embodiment. Reflections on religious learning in youth ministry', in *Journal of youth and theology* 11 (2012) 7-22.

<sup>63</sup> LONG: 'Christian worship' 70.

<sup>64</sup> J. DE HART: *Geloven binnen en buiten verband. Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland* (Den Haag 2014).

<sup>65</sup> DE HART: *Geloven binnen en buiten verband* 89-95.



ers do not take position in this debate.<sup>66</sup> Some voices in our study can be considered as a middle position or as not taking position, but this is not a general tendency. One factor that may influence different outcomes is that our respondents are not necessarily young people who are only related to church because of the parents. The young people often come to the youth worship themselves. However, not all of them go to church Sunday services every week, like in the orthodox category of De Hart.

In a qualitative study we do not focus on numbers and percentages. Furthermore, our study is not an longitudinal study and therefore does not speak of trends. What we can conclude on the basis of the empirical data is that the interpretations of God and worship of our respondents vary and that both orthodox and seeker views (which does not necessarily overlap with the middle position of De Boer) are in youth worship and that the church has to reflect on these. Orthodox views on God and views of a quest are not separated that much in the field of youth worship. This separation may be an impression that both other studies yield, but in our data we even find the different interpretations within one and the same gathering as well as by one and the same person.

As described earlier, revelation is understood as a divine activity, but also as a subjective category of the human (re)cognition. Adolescents recognize and interpret God in different ways. Some adolescents speak of God's presence and coming, while others are to be characterized as seekers of God. Worship gatherings provide triggers that initiate the communication between God and adolescents, though there is also a group who just participate without actively and consciously taking part in this communication. These are adolescents who 'just' participate in youth worship with no (or hardly any) further thoughts about God.

### 5.3. (Theological) new perspectives for the various groups of adolescents

As practical theologians we also take up our pragmatic task and propose some perspectives to stimulate the practice of youth worship, based on our findings.

For adolescents with interpretations of 'convinced about God's presence' his presence often means a coming to them or to the assembly.<sup>67</sup> The movement of 'God to us' is crucial. In the interviews this movement is not formulated in the classical terms of salvation – for example, we hardly noticed a classical notion like the need for forgiveness – but in terms of affirmation, encouragement, empowerment, or recharging. That God often reveals himself in biblical terms in a critical and fragmented way is hardly captured when adolescents speak of

<sup>66</sup> E. DE BOER: *Je bent jong en je wilt anders. 245 jongeren over wat hen bezighoudt en inspireert* (Kampen 2006) 55.

<sup>67</sup> The adolescents do not make a distinction between God and Jesus. This might be because the researcher speaks in the interviews mostly about 'God' but those times that she explicitly asks about Jesus, the reflection of adolescents was in the sense that they consider Jesus and God a bit as the same.

God's presence, neither God's holy otherness. Openness for these ways of revelation and God's otherness, may be considered an important ingredient for broadening the theological scope of adolescents. Also consciousness that because of distress and pain or doubt speaking of God's presence may not always be possible can be added to this. In themes, sermons, discussions, as well as prayer and songs this can be expressed both discursive and embodied.

God's existence is questioned and searched for by other adolescents. 'To be or not to be' appears to be the urgent question for these respondents. For some God is simultaneously believed in and questioned. This quest and indecisive aspect may be part of the discovering process that is characteristic of adolescence and may be interpreted in psychological terms. Adolescents deal with the God of their childhood and background, and in their spiritual development new (critical) questions and options as well as doubt come in. Some quotes point to a disappearance of God (at least of certain ideas of how God is). Openness for a new epiphany and discovery may be considered an important ingredient for a renewed participation in youth worship.

At the same time, 'this not being sure' must probably not only be placed in a psychological frame, but also in a broader spiritual phenomenon nowadays. These respondents do not say that God does not exist, or that he is dead or absent. They keep openness to God in their uncertainty or indecisive approach. This leads us to the image of the silent God. Ontologically speaking 'God being silent' differs from adolescents doubting whether God exists, but both perspectives leave openness for a possibility of speaking of God. Korpel and De Moor argue in their study about the silent God that in the ancient Near East and in the Bible a collaboration between gods / God and man is supposed: the people are the spokesmen of the gods / God. Revelation usually comes through people to people. That today God seems to be silent, then has to do with developments in modern times, in which people no longer want to or dare to testify, no longer have the courage to speak on behalf of God, they conclude. As such, the silence of God calls the church, congregation and believers not to keep silent about him, but to speak.<sup>68</sup> The epistemological need for speaking and for interaction that Korpel and De Moor claim, means that the second group with its claims about God's non-existence (including indecisive approaches) may be challenged by new approaches of God, probably less on the question of his existence, and more on God's acts in the world and the challenge for people to interact with God's acts. Discussions or sermons in youth worship could focus on how people interact with God and his acts.

Whether adolescents have an active or passive interpretation of God in worship, and how adolescents interpret God and worship and deal with it, varies. We noticed that the church background influences the view of the adolescents. To explain the variety in more detail, extensive psychological-religious and background research of adolescents is needed. The variety may be influenced

<sup>68</sup> KORPEL & DE MOOR: *The silent God* 1, 293-298.

by religious socialization, as well as personal faith engagement, biography, and the competence to express themselves.<sup>69</sup> The challenge with regard to the line of interpretation 'God?' is to create awareness for young people that the focus and orientation also matter and to help the young people in religiously naming what they do in youth worship. (New) religious language and skills to name experiences in a religious way have to be developed. Chauvet argues that liturgical catechism should stimulate the conscious participation.<sup>70</sup> This stimulates understanding of liturgy which includes affections that are important in liturgy. It may be helpful to focus young people on the process of worship, on what takes place and why, as well as trying to create possibilities for young people to discover their own particular religious experiences in worship. The challenge is to distinguish what the lack of connecting God and worship means. Maybe the respondents cannot name things and experiences religiously, or maybe their experiences in the gathering have no religious connotation for them at all.

#### 5.4. *Semper maior*

As the aspects of mediation and 'engaged egos' clearly show, no other way remains for human beings than to use their (embodied and discursive) language in order to recognize revelation, faith and church (in particular worship) and its interaction. The communications, experiences and convictions of 'God in youth worship', however, do not necessarily fully coincide with 'how God is' and 'how he reveals himself'. The link between the human communication, the interpretation of messengers and the God-human communication is theologically anchored in the freedom of God, in his initiative and his being *semper maior*, as well as in the fragmented and particular knowledge and acting of people.

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<sup>69</sup> See for the topic of competence, for example, J.P. BYRNES: 'Cognitive development during adolescence', in G.R. ADEMS, & M.D. BERONSKY, *Blackwell handbook of adolescents* (Malden / Oxford / Calton 2003) 227-246, p. 229, p. 239.

<sup>70</sup> L.M. CHAUVET: 'L'intériorisation en la liturgie demain. Essai de prospective', in P. DE CLERCK (éd.): *La liturgie lieu de théologie* (Paris 1999) 201-229, pp. 206-209.

