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# Normativity in Empirical Youth Ministry Research

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## Normativity in Empirical Youth Ministry Research

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### Abstract

Normative considerations are an important part of empirical research on the youth ministry. In the presentation of results in many practical theological studies on the youth ministry, however, rarely a sufficient reflection is provided on the kind of normativity that plays a role in the way practices are investigated or on how normativity is present in the practices that have been studied. Partly based on the

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case studies of three PhD studies on the youth ministry from the Dutch Research Centre for Youth, Church and Culture, this article aims (a) to give an overview of the layers of normativity that can be distinguished in current practical theological youth ministry research and (b) to give directions for the design, execution, and reporting of practical theological youth ministry research in terms of a sufficient reflection on normativity.

### Keywords

normativity – youth ministry research – practical theology – research methodology

## 1 Introduction<sup>4</sup>

After a public presentation of our Research Centre for Youth, Church and Culture<sup>5</sup> in which we gave an overview of the Centre's current practical theological research projects on the youth ministry and religious education practices, a systematic theologian asked the question about normativity in our work. The question "is every practice good?" can be regarded as the question that summarizes her remarks. To us, this was a trigger to elaborate our thoughts on the place of normativity in empirical youth ministry research. Normativity is the existence, working, or formation of standards or convictions in practices and in the observation and interpretation of practices. In the description of the normative task of practical theological interpretation, Osmer (2008) distinguishes the following three groups of standards: theological, ethical, and "good practice" norms.<sup>6</sup> However, we can easily expand these groups with pedagogical standards and psychological

<sup>4</sup> We thank colleague dr. Petruschka Schaafsma for asking us the question "is every practice good?", which was the starting point for this article. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest. Authors' responsibilities in writing this article: The first two authors, De Kock and Sonnenberg, are responsible for the design of this article and the completion of the text. The third author, Renkema, wrote the subsection on his own research in Section 3 and, in a previous phase, critically assessed the feasibility of the four layers of normativity, as proposed in Section 2.

<sup>5</sup> [www.ojkc.nl](http://www.ojkc.nl).

<sup>6</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical theology: an introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 4.

norms, to name a few.

Normativity and practical theology are debated and discussed, among other topics that Miller-McLemore (2012) elaborates on.<sup>7</sup> Miller-McLemore believes that misunderstandings about practical theology exist. One of these misunderstandings is that “practical theology is largely, if not wholly, descriptive, interpretative, empirical, and not normative, theological, and in some cases (dare I say) Christian. Description and interpretation by themselves are insufficient. Practical theology’s objective is both to understand *and* to influence religious wisdom in congregations and public life more generally”.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, practical theology not being normative is definitely a misunderstanding. The question “is every practice good?”, according to our observation, does not stem from an absence of normativity in our empirical practical theological research projects but, instead, from an absence of a sufficient explication of and reflection on normativity in these research projects.

According to Osmer (2008), normativity is a core issue in the work of the practical theologian, both in the design of research projects and in the reflection on its outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Osmer (2008) identifies the normative task of the practical theologian as one of the following four core tasks: (a) the descriptive–empirical task, (b) the interpretive task, (c) the normative task, and (d) the pragmatic task.<sup>10</sup> The normative task of the practical theologian is focused on the question “what ought to be going on?” The question “is every practice a good practice?” can only be answered if any clue of the answer to the question “what ought to be going on?” can be found in a particular practice. However, youth ministry research has different layers at which this normative question can be addressed. With regard to doing qualitative research on the faith narratives of adolescents, for example, Sonnenberg, Visser-Vogel, and Van Wijnen (2016) emphasize the possible gap between the adult researcher perspective and the adolescent participant perspective.<sup>11</sup> In ethnographic or interview research projects with

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<sup>7</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Five misunderstandings about practical theology,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (2012): 5–26.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Osmer, *Practical theology*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Ronelle Sonnenberg, Elsbeth Visser-Vogel, & Harmen van Wijnen, “Reconstructing faith narratives: doing research on the faith of adolescents,” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 15, no. 1 (2016): 23–43.

adolescents, one can thus easily see the layer of the particular language and meaning-making frameworks of the adult researcher, on the one hand, and the layer of the particular language and meaning-making frameworks of the adolescent participant, on the other. In addition, one might think of normativity at the layer of the research project as a project. Examples of this kind of normativity can be found in a recent reflection on his own work by Root (2016), in which he proposes to raise ministry as the very organizing principle in empirical practical theological research projects, and in a recent reflection on the role of the empirical in youth ministry research by De Kock and Norheim (2018), in which they typify the work of the youth ministry scholar as a hermeneutical struggle with a kataphatic mode (being involved in positively describing God and God's attributes) and an apophatic mode (being utterly unable to describe God beyond sensation). In this article, we aim to explain these and other layers of normativity further.<sup>12</sup>

We believe that normative considerations are an essential part of empirical youth ministry research, and, therefore, a reflection on normativity cannot be missed in both the planning of and reporting on these research projects. We observe, however, in the presentation of results in many practical theological studies on the youth ministry that rarely a sufficient reflection is provided on what kind of normativity plays a role in the way practices are investigated or on how normativity is present in the practices that have been studied. What we do observe is the growing attention to the particular (normative) position of the researcher by giving the reader of research reports and articles a clue about the biography of the researcher and his/her personal connection with the central theme of the research conducted. Good examples of these kinds of biographical notes can be found in the reflection on the methodology section in the dissertation of Visser-Vogel (2015) and in the reliability procedures section in the dissertation of Sonnenberg (2015).<sup>13</sup> However, this is but one aspect of how normativity can

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Root, "Regulating the empirical in practical theology: on critical realism, divine action, and the place of the ministerial," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 15, no. 1 (2016): 44–64; Jos (A.) de Kock & Bard E.H. Norheim, "Youth ministry research and the empirical," Accepted for publication in *International Journal of Practical Theology* 22, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>13</sup> Elsbeth Visser-Vogel, *Religious identity development of orthodox Muslim adolescents in The Netherlands*. Dissertation Utrecht University, The Netherlands, 2015; Ronelle Sonnenberg, *Youth worship in protestant contexts. A practical theological theory of participation of adolescents*. Dissertation Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2015.

be reflected on in empirical practical theological studies on the youth ministry and how this aspect of personal standards and convictions can play a role in different layers of normativity. We believe that the practical theological research community involved in youth ministry studies can strengthen its scholarly work if the different layers of normativity in its work are better understood and reflected on. In the words of Ziebertz (2002; 2004), this task has to do with clarifying discursive normativity, which can be understood as follows:<sup>14</sup>

- “to grasp, arrange, and describe the normativity that plays a role in a particular area of practice, that causes conflicts, that paralyses conduct, etc.;
- to present normativity in theories, from which illumination of a problematic practice is expected;
- to structure the description of normativity in practice and in corresponding theories so that it is reconstructable and that it may be contradicted; and
- to rationally reconstruct the iterative relationship between knowledge and object
- to reveal the implicit decisions so that comment may be made upon the necessity and adequacy of those decisions”.<sup>15</sup>

Our aims in this article are (a) to give an overview of the layers of normativity that we can distinguish in current practical theological youth ministry research, (b) to explain the usefulness of this set of layers by describing several studies as examples, and (c) to give directions for the design, execution, and reporting of practical theological youth ministry research in terms of a sufficient reflection on normativity. The central research questions in this article are as follows: (1) What are the layers of normativity in practical theological youth ministry research? (2) How can these layers be explicitly or

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<sup>14</sup> Hans-Georg Ziebertz, “Normativity and empirical research in practical theology,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 15, no. 1 (2002): 5–18; Hans-Georg Ziebertz, *Empirical methodology and normativity*. In: *Normativity and empirical research in theology*, J.A. van der Ven & M. Scherer-Rath (Eds.), 2004, Leiden/Boston: Brill, pp. 289–306.

<sup>15</sup> Ziebertz, “Normativity and empirical research,” 16.

implicitly recognized in practical theological youth ministry studies? Section 2 focuses on the first question and deals with an overview of the layers of normativity. Section 3 deals with the second research question on recognition by discussing three PhD research projects on the youth ministry and religious education that are a part of the Dutch Research Centre for Youth, Church and Culture. Section 4 presents the directions for the design, execution, and reporting of practical theological youth ministry research in terms of a reflection on normativity. Precisely, this is both the theoretical and practical relevance of the article—to help the practical theological research community involved in youth ministry studies to strengthen its scholarly work by giving structured attention to normativity. This article intends to support researchers directly involved in conducting empirical studies (e.g., PhD students), the researchers who are supervising them (e.g., in a role as promoters), and scholars involved in reviewing manuscripts for publication (e.g., in academic journals). In Section 5, we present the conclusion.

## 2 Layers of Normativity

According to Norbert Mette (1978; 1984),<sup>16</sup> ‘the connection between theory and practice has changed to the effect that Practical Theology no longer provides “Theory *for* practice”, but is rather – modifying the phrasing of Schleiermacher – “Theory of practice”.’ Religious practice is the material object of study of practical theology, and empirical research seeks a theory of practice by taking the insider’s perspective. This section deals with an overview of the layers of normativity, and for this aim, distinguishing between the religious practice being studied, the theory of this practice being construed, and the relationship between religious practice and the theory of practice is important.

We propose to distinguish between the following four layers of normativity: (1) discourse in religious practice, (2) professional theory of practice, (3) academic theory of practice, and (4) the metatheoretical

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Ziebertz, “Normativity and empirical research,” 6, and Ziebertz, “Empirical methodology,” 291. Norbert Mette, *Theorie der Praxis*, (Düsseldorf, 1978); Norbert Mette, *Von der Anwendungszur Handlungswissenschaft*. In: O. Fuchs (Hg.). *Theologie und Handeln*, 1984, Düsseldorf, pp. 50–63.



foundation of the research project. We will describe these layers in more detail in the remainder of this section. The distinction between these four layers is a result of a literature study and a group discussion on normativity among research members of our Research Centre for Youth, Church and Culture (OJKC), and in addition, tested and sharpened by a critical and detailed examination of the three OJKC PhD research projects as will be discussed in Section 3. The boundaries between the layers of normativity are not to be taken as strictly closed boundaries. The layers significantly overlap, meaning that the boundaries are fluent and transparent. However, for analyzing normativity in empirical practical theological research practices (which we will demonstrate in more detail in Section 3), distinguishing between these layers is helpful.

### 2.1 *Discourse in Religious Practice*

The layer of discourse in religious practice is about discourses containing both text-based, verbal and non-verbal expressions visible in religious practices. These discourses reflect standards and convictions in the tradition of the practice, as well as the current standards and convictions of actors (including the researcher) in the practice.

A religious practice that is the object of research is always more or less historically and locally rooted in a particular tradition and historically and locally embedded in a culture or cultural tracks. Tradition and culture are a part of the DNA of a religious community, religious network, or religious context in which a religious practice is situated. When it comes to youth ministry practices, for example, the denominational position of a faith community in which the youth ministry practice is studied is an important carrier of normativity in youth ministry practice. Denomination is rooted in a historic tradition and, at the same time, operant in the here and now in a particular place embedded in a particular culture. Christian Reformed, Evangelical, Anglican, and Interreligious—these are some examples that hint on what is meant by tradition in religious practices. Clearly, only the use of such a label is not a sufficient indication of the normativity it carries; Evangelical in New York is not the same as evangelical in a little town in The Netherlands, for example. The history and cultural tracks in localities should be thematized in relation to these kinds of religious labels.

A religious practice that is the object of research is not only rooted in a particular tradition and embedded in a particular culture but, at the same time, is the object of the normative discourse of different actors and, as a result, influenced by different, sometimes concurring, normative positions. An example of such a normative discourse is a debate in a particular

congregation on the aims that catechesis practices in the congregation should strive for. Although catechesis has had a long tradition as the transformation of knowledge of the Scripture and tradition, a debate is ongoing among parents, in which preferences for a more child-centered catechesis with emphasis on personal meaning-making processes come to the fore. This example brings us to the level of the professional theory of practice.

### 2.2 *Professional Theory of Practice*

This layer is about standards and convictions situated in operant theories of practice or, in other words, theories of practice at work. This layer has particularly to do with normativity as observed in theories construed on the basis of or directing performances in these religious practices. We call them *professional* theories of practice because these operant theories of practice are often found in the actions, habits, and minds of professional workers in religious practices, such as pastors, youth workers, and church leaders. With the term “professional,” we do not only refer to paid workers in congregations but also to volunteer people in all kinds of religious practices who are more or less reflective practitioners in that religious practice. These professionals or reflective practitioners are acting partly on the basis of knowledge (theories) of the good and bad practices they have experienced thus far and, therefore, are normatively steered by performances that convinced them, for example, on the best way to solve a problem. Professionals and reflective practitioners are also partly steered by normative positions on important themes in their work. Here, we might take up again the example of catechesis aims. The preference for the transfer of knowledge of the Scripture and tradition might stem from the conception of religious identity as a commitment to tradition, whereas a preference for personal meaning-making processes might stem from a view of religious identity as an authentic personal choice and expression in life.

### 2.3 *Academic Theory of Practice*

This layer is about normativity situated in academic theories of practice that can be found in handbooks, academic journal articles, scientific theories, and so on. The example of religious identity, being a commitment to tradition or being an authentic personal expression in life, cannot only be found at the level of professional theories of practice but also at the level of academic theories of practice. In a research project on the religious identity development of Muslim adolescents, for example, one might choose to allow the theoretical framework be informed by theories in line with the

commitment conception or by theories more in line with the personal expression conception of identity. Very often, in academic research on religious practices, a broad spectrum of (sometimes concurring) normative stances informs the theoretical background of particular studies. Another important aspect of this layer of normativity is the choice of the academic discipline(s) in which the particular religious practice is studied. As will be shown in Section 3, different kinds of religious practices—whether church-related groups of adolescents, liturgical–ritual activities with children in congregations, or practices of religious education with primary school pupils—can be investigated from different angles of academic traditions, such as theology, anthropology, pedagogy, and sociology. A choice of one or more of such angles is, in a sense, a normative choice, including choices for particular ideological tracks of reflection within an academic discipline.

#### 2.4 *Metatheoretical Foundation of the Research Project*

This layer of normativity is about how the researcher, the research group, or the research community considers the particular empirical research study in terms of how the empirical, the theoretical concepts, and the personal convictions and experiences of the researcher are related to one another. This is what we call the layer of metatheoretical foundation of the research project, which was hinted on in the introduction section. There, we referred to the example of a recent reflection on his own work by Root (2016), in which he proposes to raise ministry as the very organizing principle in empirical practical theological research projects, and to another recent reflection on the role of the empirical in youth ministry research by De Kock and Norheim (2018), in which they typify the work of the youth ministry scholar as a hermeneutical struggle with a kataphatic mode (being involved in positively describing God and God's attributes) and an apophatic mode (being utterly unable to describe God beyond sensation).<sup>17</sup> To take an emic, insider perspective in empirical research on youth ministry practices, which we, in the Research Centre for Youth, Church and Culture, constantly do, is, in fact, a normative choice on the metatheoretical level. Also a choice for critical realism as a philosophical/social perspective in a research study, for example, is a normative choice on the metatheoretical level.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> Root, "Regulating the empirical"; De Kock & Norheim, "Youth ministry research and the empirical".

<sup>18</sup> Critical realism "... acknowledges the ontological (divine) reality that exists independently of

metatheoretical layer is about reflections on the nature of the research results. Metaphorically said, “what are the dots on a blank sheet and what is the blank sheet?”<sup>19</sup> These are ontological and epistemological questions.

### 3 Layers of Normativity as Reflected in Three Youth Ministry Studies

This section deals with the second research question on recognition by analyzing three current practical theological PhD studies on the youth ministry and religious education from our Research Centre for Youth, Church and Culture. The Centre is a part of the Department of Practical Theology of the Protestant Theological University. All our studies have the material object of study of religious practices in which young people are involved. Various researchers investigate the broad field of youth, church, and culture from a variety of angles, such as theology, pedagogy, anthropology, and sociology. These differences in background also lead to certain ways in which normativity plays a role in research projects.

We selected three different PhD projects for our exemplary analysis of the layers of normativity. One PhD project has been finished, and two PhD projects are currently in progress. First, we will provide our analysis of the one that is finished, which is the study of Van Wijnen (2016) on faith in small groups of adolescents.<sup>20</sup> This dissertation is an empirical research project with a focus on groups of teenagers deriving mainly from theological and sociological perspectives. Next, an analysis is given on the research project in progress of Van Leersum-Bekebrede (20XX), who focuses on the liturgical-ritual activities for children in Protestant churches in The Netherlands.<sup>21</sup> In this empirical study, young children from 0–12 years of age in church settings

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the epistemology of human beings, although human activity is needed to understand reality. (...) The ‘critical realism’ is not a simple or direct realism approach, because it is open to criticism concerning the claims and the supposed connection with the being of reality” (Sonnenberg 2015: 201).

<sup>19</sup> Marcel Barnard, Mirella Klomp, Ronelle Sonnenberg, S. Belderbos, & Nienke van Aniel, “Dots on a blank sheet. Procedures in ritual and liturgical research,” *Jaarboek voor liturgieonderzoek* 25 (2009): 35–46.

<sup>20</sup> Harmen van Wijnen, *Faith in small groups of adolescents. Being together as a basic given*. Dissertation Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Lydia van Leersum-Bekebrede, *Liturgical-ritual activities for children from 0–12 in Protestant contexts in the Netherlands*. Dissertation in progress, 20XX.

are at the core, and theological and anthropological perspectives are combined. Our third analysis is based on the research project in progress of Renkema (20XX), who is studying practices of religious education and rituals in Dutch cooperation schools.<sup>22</sup> This project is focused on primary school pupils in school settings, and the research derives from both theological and pedagogical/educational perspectives.

Aside from the variety of topics, contexts, and research designs, there is another important variety of features in these selected studies in terms of the particular relationship we, as authors of the current article, have to these studies. The authors De Kock and Sonnenberg were members of the thesis committee that reviewed the original manuscript of Van Wijnen (2016) and participated in the public defense of it. De Kock and Sonnenberg are currently supervising the study of Van Leersum-Bekebrede (20XX) in their roles as co-promoters. The studies of Van Wijnen and Van Leersum-Bekebrede are thus reflected on from a reviewing and supervising points of view, respectively. The analysis of the study of Van Wijnen is ours, the analysis of the study of Van Leersum-Bekebrede is in cooperation with her. She selected- at our request- examples of normative layers in her research. Being a co-author of the article, Renkema (20XX) will reflect on the study from his perspective as the researcher himself, while being involved in conducting the PhD research project.

### 3.1 *Analysis of the Study by Van Wijnen (2016)*

The study of Van Wijnen (2016) is entitled “Faith in small groups of adolescents: being together as a basic given.” It is an empirical research project in which five small groups of adolescents are investigated using ethnographical tools, such as participant observation, focus groups, and interviews with the participating adolescents and leaders of the small groups. The five small groups under study were directly or indirectly related to a local congregation of the Protestant Church in The Netherlands. The study is presented as a practical theological research in which sociological concepts and notions are combined with theological concepts and notions to facilitate a theological discourse on the basis of the empirical data. “The theological perspective can be in harmony with the sociological perspective based on the creation focus on reality. Differences can exist in a critical dialogue with

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<sup>22</sup> Erik Renkema, Religious identity, religious education and rituals at Dutch cooperation schools. Dissertation in progress, 20XX.

the sociological perspective based on the revelation and salvation view of reality espoused by the theological perspective”.<sup>23</sup>

The religious practice that is central to the study of Van Wijnen, therefore, is the field of youth ministry practices in the broad context of the Protestant Church in The Netherlands. When it comes to the layer *discourse in religious practice*, much could be said about the historical developments and typical Protestant traditions of the youth ministry in the Dutch context. If we look at what is said in this regard in Van Wijnen’s dissertation, the most dominant observation of the author that can be found both on the book cover and in the general introduction is Protestant youth ministry practices serving as a bridge between the church and adolescents. This reflects a church tradition in which a gap between the church as an institute, on the one hand, and a young generation, on the other, is experienced and all kinds of youth ministry practices are developed to connect the church with young people and vice versa.

Furthermore, a variety of normative discourses could be brought to the fore, both at the level of local church congregations and discourses on religion in society at the national level. The particular discourse that Van Wijnen selects as an important background for his research project has to do with the following: ‘We have to reformulate the question “can we bridge the gap between church and adolescents” to “Can the church and adolescents find new ways in thinking, behaving and acting together to live and to believe beyond the gap?”’.<sup>24</sup> This main question is a major theme in the research project and stems from the author’s observation that “[t]he practice of youth ministry yields many examples showing that the traditional approach to organizing activities and church-based groups is not attractive to adolescents”.<sup>25</sup>

These particular observations and perceptions of both the tradition of Protestant youth ministry practices and the current challenges in these practices are reflected in what the author presents at the level of layer 2, *professional theory of practice*. A direct impression of professional theories of practice at work is found in the general introduction: “In youth ministry, there is a basic understanding that small groups are very important and that these small groups have a great potential to combine faith and daily life in a

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<sup>23</sup> Van Wijnen, *Faith in small groups*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

strong social network. In situations where they participate in organized activities, adolescents are often perceived as having negative attitudes”.<sup>26</sup> Here, Van Wijnen presents the concept and the power of small groups, which becomes the central concept for theological reflection in his dissertation. This concept is taken from professional theories of practice in the field and links up with a general observation of Van Wijnen in terms of a development toward bottom-up approaches in youth work, which he includes in the preface of his dissertation: “From 2004 until 2013, I participated in the youth work organized by the Protestant Church in The Netherlands. During these years, a transformation from a ‘top-down’ to a ‘bottom-up’ approach took place within the church”.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, Van Wijnen himself was, for a long period, a part of the field of youth ministry practices, while working for two youth organizations within the Protestant Church in The Netherlands. Against this background, the aim of the dissertation to provide a creative and innovative contribution to the search for new paradigms in youth ministry might not only be conceived as an academic interest but also as a personal interest. In general, distinguishing these particular interests, both personal and academic, is important when evaluating the ways in which the empirical data are analyzed in light of the particular concepts and theories chosen by the researcher.

When it comes to layer 3, *academic theory of practice*, Van Wijnen strikingly starts with the following propositions: (a) theology should be construed with use of other academic disciplines than theology itself, i.e., more than currently is done, and (b) theology should be construed on the basis of youth practices, i.e., more than currently is done. In relationship to this, Van Wijnen explains, “In this practical theological research, sociological concepts and notions are also used to develop the concepts in this study. The sociological concepts and notions were combined with theological concepts and notions in a critical realistic way, which made them useful in the theological discourse”.<sup>28</sup> As mentioned, Van Wijnen presents small groups as the central concept for theological reflection in his dissertation. The small group as a sociological concept/notion is embedded in the work of Maffesoli

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 44.

(1996) on neo-tribes.<sup>29</sup> As a theological concept/notion, it is embedded in the theology of Van Gennep (1989) in relation to what Van Wijnen calls covenant-genesis.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the reflection on the power of small groups is embedded in the work of practical theologian Pete Ward (2002; 2012).<sup>31</sup>

Not only sociological and theological sources inform the main argument developed in the dissertation; to a large extent, the argument is also based on empirical work in which the voices of adolescents come to the fore. In seriously taking the concrete life and living together of adolescents partaking in five small groups directly or indirectly related to a local Protestant congregation, the researcher brings in the voices of these adolescents as an empirical source for construing theology. This is the first and is an important aspect of the layer *metatheoretical foundation of the research project*. A second aspect is already visible in the preface when Van Wijnen explains, "... this study became the life report of a developmental process in the church, the youth organizations in the church and of myself as a researcher and a person."<sup>32</sup> This means that the research project is conceived not only as a description of developments in the field but also of developments in the individual as a researcher and a person: studying a phenomenon is not just impersonally registering but is instead an inherently personally engaged endeavor. This observation is important in the level of the metatheoretical foundation of the research project. One other observation in this layer is how Van Wijnen chooses critical realism as a way of dealing with the observed reality of the small groups under study: "This epistemological and ontological position also has consequences with respect to the theological view on sociological reality. Based on Ward's proposal [referring to Ward 2012; this note added by De Kock, Sonnenberg & Renkema] this study presumes that sociological and theological reality coincide. The same phenomena can be described from both sociological and theological perspectives".<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Michel Maffesoli, *The time of the tribes: the decline of individualism in mass society* (London: Sage, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Ted van Gennep, *De terugkeer van de verloren Vader* [The return of the lost Father] (Baarn: Ten Have, 1989).

<sup>31</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid church* (Peabody (Massachusetts): Hendrickson, 2002); Pete Ward (Ed.), *Perspectives on ecclesiology and ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Van Wijnen, *Faith in small groups*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 45–46.



### 3.2 *Analysis of the Study by Van Leersum-Bekebrede (20XX)*

Van Leersum investigates worship practices, also called liturgical rituals, with children.<sup>34</sup> This contribution is based on mainly one article of Van Leersum, but the research is still ongoing, and normativity also plays a role in other articles.

Taking the insider's perspective and aiming to develop a theory of practice rather than a theory for practice are important in her approach. From this starting point, she deals with different norms that she meets in the practices she investigates. This is a distinction in what we call layer 4, *metatheoretical foundation of the research project*. One of the important remarks in the article "Deconstructing ideals of worship with children" is as follows: "We argue that the dichotomy of intergenerational and target-group worship is not useful because it conflates normative notions with one extreme or the other. *In reality* [italics by De Kock, Sonnenberg & Renkema], various pedagogical and theological views and aims inspire a plurality of worship practices with children".<sup>35</sup> The researcher searches a way beyond one of the two dominant practical theories for practice positions of intergenerational liturgy or target-group liturgy by arguing that in reality, a complexity of normativity in and of the practice exists. The practice and the insider's perspective are Van Leersum's starting points, and from there, she concludes about the need to keep the complexity in our theories. A whole world of normativity lies behind these remarks, as we will further explain.

The research is done in Protestant contexts. These contexts, of course, bring Protestant DNA forward, such as not only the (historically based) importance of children understanding the bible story and the sermon, but also the variety of children's worship practices connecting with the broad liturgical variety in Protestant contexts, and each congregation has a certain freedom to shape worship/liturgical rituals. This distinction of the given tradition(s) is what we call the normativity of tradition in the current discourse of the practice, which is the layer *discourse in religious practice*.

Van Leersum, trained as an anthropologist, bases her research results on ethnographic research. She extensively describes the shapes, materials,

<sup>34</sup> The research project "Liturgical-ritual activities for children from 0–12 in Protestant contexts in the Netherlands" is running from 2016 to 2020. We mainly base this analysis on the first article of this project. Thanks to Lydia van Leersum–Bekebrede for her comments on this section.

<sup>35</sup> Lydia van Leersum, Ronelle Sonnenberg, Jos de Kock, & Marcel Barnard, "Deconstructing ideals of worship with children," Accepted for publication in *Studia Liturgica*, 20XX).

actions, and other aspects in the children's worship. None of these actions and shapes are neutral. Children sometimes go to their own space, or they stay in the church and have something specific to do (like a church game or so). Different actors in the field of children's worship come with different actions and reflections. These vary from correcting children when they are noisy and searching for possibilities to meet and speak with the children, to explaining that children going to their own space is more practical or that in liturgical services, a kind of rest/peacefulness is important, among others. Actors (a parent, a youth worker, or another actor) show some of their (liturgical) norms in these actions and reflections. In the action of participant observation, the researcher also has her own normative reflections, as can be read in her field notes. We give two examples from her field notes: "The tip of Yaël's tongue sticks out of her mouth in concentration. But then Wiebe gives a helping hand, I think to make sure the candle won't go out again. As he is holding Yaël's right hand, in which she holds the candle, Yaël herself looks away. She is hiding her face. Mrs. Floor emphatically says 'Oh, she's afraid!' and I, too, feel uneasy as we watch the child being forced to do something that she doesn't want to do."<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, for the researcher, respect for what the children do or do not want to do is important. Second, the researcher, in her field notes,<sup>37</sup> expresses astonishment about all the children of the children's choir and most of their parents taking part in the Lord's Supper. Most of the children are not baptized, and some of the parents say they are atheists. This practice of unbaptized children and atheist parents taking part in the Lord's Supper is something the researcher is not used to. The questions she asks are as follows: who is taking responsibility in and for this praxis? Is education not at least needed so that children know what they are doing? Is baptism not a condition for participating in the meal? Here, we are dealing with what we call the normativity of actors in the current discourses in the practices (layer 1, *discourse in religious practice*). In this second example the researchers' initial reaction arises from the liturgical tradition(s) she has been raised in. In her notes,<sup>38</sup> she describes that she was grown up a more homogeneous

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<sup>36</sup> Van Leersum-Bekebrede, Field notes taken during Baptism service, February 12, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Van Leersum-Bekebrede, Field notes taken during Service with Children's Choir, June 18, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Van Leersum-Bekebrede, Logbook Spirituality 'On my perception of the field', August 29, 2017.

Christian worldview and has been confronted in her research and her research team with a variety of confessional notions in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. This gives challenging food for thought. Doing research influences the researcher, especially because her metatheoretical stance to take the insiders' perspective seriously leads her to re-examine her initial reactions and to change or contextualize her own beliefs.

The reflective practitioners, often actors in the field, as well as the researcher, have access to practical theories of practices (layer 2, *professional theory of practice*). These are the theories that address the models for actors, roles, and pastoral or educational approaches, to name a few. One of these theories is called intergenerational liturgy and church. This term often emerges in the data of this present research as a theory *for* practice, and it is contrasted with target group theories. It relates to the roles and aims in and for practices. With these theories, pedagogical and theological claims and norms are at stake. For example, on the one hand, the theological claim of the church as one Body of Christ and, on the other hand, the theological claim of the uniqueness of every person, also the uniqueness in faith, are often opposed, as Van Leersum explains.

These claims bring us to layer 3, *academic theory of practice*. The researcher refers to childhood studies in which the normative point of view that children are important in their uniqueness is often stressed. The choice of the concept of liturgical ritual is another example of normativity at the level of academic theories; it includes an anthropological and a theological perspective on the field of children's worship. Questions, such as "does children's worship exist for children's uniqueness or is it because of the glory of God?", are related to these theories.

The final question to be asked in this section is as follows: is every liturgical ritual with children a good practice in the eyes of the researcher? In empirical research, every practice is taken seriously, but this is not the same as saying that every practice is good. In the case of the article of Van Leersum, a forced and exclusive focus by reflective practitioners on one of the two models, intergenerational and target group, is not good. The normative questions that will be asked in her further research are whether the theological or pedagogical normativity of praxis is appropriate for the shapes of the praxis and whether the praxis will be interpreted within the frame of the broader social and pedagogical context in which children live.

### 3.3 *Analysis of the Study by Renkema (20XX)*

The research of Renkema focuses on the values of school identity as interpreted by teachers of cooperation schools for primary education in the

Netherlands and the relationship between these values and the practice of religious education in these schools.

With regard to layer 1, *discourse in religious practice*, Renkema investigates this theme in the unique and specific context of the Dutch educational system. In the Netherlands, a school is either a confessional school or a public secular school. Both are equally financed by the government. In practice, more and more schools are a combination of both types because of the decreasing number of pupils. This practice is challenged because of the fact that a secular non-confessional school is combined with a school that organizes its education based on a religious or philosophical view. Many of the values and practices of these schools are historically developed with a long and valued tradition. Teachers, principals, parents, and most of the pupils are encouraged to bridge the differences between these two distinct identities and to practice living together in education, particularly religious education. It is this unique background that plays an important role in Renkema's research.

His research is also characterized by the second layer of normativity, which is *professional theory of practice*. He investigates the values of the professionals, teachers, and principals of the cooperating schools. Renkema particularly focuses on their good and meaningful education values and their perspectives on the practices of religious education as identity markers in their schools. In this research, Renkema chooses for these respondents and not for the pupils or the parents, who are other important players at the schools. Studying these professionals, teachers, and principals is an explicit objective; they are responsible for education, they organize this education, and do so with a purpose. After all, "it is teachers who in the end, will change the world of school by understanding it".<sup>39</sup> As an example, we see that in several of the schools, teachers choose to teach in one of the two merged identities, either the public secular education or the Christian education. At regular times in the week, the pupils receive religious education from their teachers on the basis of one of these identities.<sup>40</sup> A second example is the choice of teachers to incorporate biblical stories in their lessons for all pupils; some of the cooperation schools do not organize religious education in a

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<sup>39</sup> Lawrence Stenhouse, "What counts as research?," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 29 (1981): 103–114.

<sup>40</sup> Erik Renkema, André Mulder, & Marcel Barnard, "Religious education and celebrations in a Dutch cooperation school," Accepted for publication in *Religion & Education*, 2018.

segregated way (as described above), but they provide it to all pupils together. One of the findings in Renkema's research was the emphasis on the biblical tradition in lessons for religious education. Teachers underlined this choice by referring to their personal and professional values.<sup>41</sup>

In Renkema's research, we recognize the third layer, which is the *academic theory of practice*, in the consequent and explicit focus on theoretical views on religious education in the context of diversity in the student population. Although this diversity is very specific in cooperation schools (most of the students are either non-affiliated or Christian because of the rural conditions of these specific schools), theoretical insights into religious diversity are put forward to shed light on the challenges that these cooperation schools face. A theoretically founded perspective is the attention to the fostering of dialogue in Renkema's research. The dialogue between students from different backgrounds about life experiences that are recognizable for all is particularly a key factor when it comes to the encounter in the context of diversity. The interpretive approach, as described by Jackson (1997) and other theoretical views concerning the influence of dialogue and encounter on the identity development of pupils, is a consequent focus in Renkema's research.<sup>42</sup> In his research, he elaborates on the theoretical point of view that dialogue and encounter in religious education are highly valued because of two characteristics. First, they encourage mutual understanding of the other, especially the other who has a world view or religious background that is unknown or strange. A democratic and peaceful way of living together is the aim of this point of view. The other characteristic is the development of the personal identity of pupils; through encounters with the other and with a differing point of view, a pupil is encouraged to reflect on his/her personal views and values.<sup>43</sup> This theory clarifies that the school context of diversity and the explicit enhancement of dialogue in religious education can be significantly important for this development and the understanding of the other.

As a former primary school teacher, Renkema brings in this curiosity for the practice of teachers in dealing with this specific diversity. He asks the

<sup>41</sup> Erik Renkema, André Mulder, & Marcel Barnard, "Key values of a Dutch cooperation school and the practice of religious education," *British Journal of Religious Education*, (2017) DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2017.1361380.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Jackson, *Religious Education. An Interpretive Approach*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> Erik Renkema, André Mulder, & Marcel Barnard, "Religious education".

question, “what can be said about this practice in relation to the values that teachers bring forward and that formal documents of the schools subscribe [to]?” Renkema shows a strong connection between theory and the views of the respondents when it comes to such values and this practice: all sources underline the importance of encounter and the living together of all pupils. Religious education, in particular, is valued as a key factor for enhancing this encounter and the mutual understanding among the pupils. From a theoretical point of view, Renkema, as a theologian, also puts forward the importance of dialogue about life experiences. This focus can enhance the understanding of the other and can be a strong practice of the identity of schools fostering this mutual understanding in the context of diversity. From a theological and a pedagogical point of view, he also asks fundamental questions about the discrepancy he perceived when relating the values of encounter and living together to the practice of religious education as identity markers. This point of view is based on a normative position of enhancing a democratic society by education, in general, and religious education, in particular: “This encounter serves the ultimate goal of educating young people in order to prepare them to live in a plural society.”

### 3.4 *Comparison of the Analyses*

When comparing the analyses of the three different PhD projects, we observe that each of the first three layers of normativity can be identified and that we can describe how each of these layers is at work in the subsequent studies. We also observe that layer 4, *meta theoretical foundation of the research project*, could not be observed in the study of Renkema (20XX). We argue that, in general, research studies can vary in whether all layers of normativity are present and reflected on and how explicitly each of these is present and reflected on. Furthermore, we observe that a discussion of each PhD project in terms of the layers of normativity helps us understand the logic of the research design and the analysis of outcomes at a deeper level—the level of standards and convictions with regard to the religious practices that are operant in personal, professional, and academic discourses.

## 4 **Directions for the Design, Execution, and Reporting of Further Research**

From our discussion and observations of normativity in the prior sections, we now turn to giving directions for the design, execution, and reporting of practical theological youth ministry research in terms of reflection on

normativity.

For the design phase in practical theological youth ministry research, we propose that the researcher and his/her supervisors extensively reflect on the research problem, research question(s), and research methodology in terms of normativity. When it comes to the research problem, questions might be asked, such as *for whom is this a problem?*, *why is it a problem?*, *where is it a problem?*, and *is this also 'our' problem?* The answers to these questions can pinpoint important standards and convictions in the religious practices under study, in the professional theories operant in these practices, and the normative informed choices in academic theories for researching the problem. When it comes to the research questions, one might ask, for example, *what rationale is behind the distinction between the main question, on the one hand, and the sub-questions, on the other, and why are sub-questions presented in this particular order?* Of course, these are questions that should be asked in general, but in this context, these are meant particularly to make explicit the standards and convictions that are beyond the research questions. The answers to these kinds of questions might reveal the convictions on how phenomena or variables are supposed to be connected beforehand. They help make implicit hypotheses more explicit and critically challenge these hypotheses beforehand. When it comes to research methodology, the main question to be asked in practical theology is on the meta-theoretical foundation of the research project: *how do I weigh empirical data in relationship to theological claims? or how do I conceive the relationship between the phenomena under study, on the one hand, and my own perception of these phenomena as a researcher, on the other?*

For the execution phase of practical theological youth ministry research, we suggest particularly that the researcher be continuously aware of his/her own standards and convictions when participating in, observing, or analyzing the youth ministry practices under study. Being aware means that he/she should register systematically his/her own normative reflections in each phase of conducting the research project. This systematic registering is definitely helped by making a special kind of field notes or logbook, in which these reflections are written down or narrated. These field notes can help in (a) forcing oneself to distinct oneself from own convictions and, as a result, to be open and sensitive to the convictions and standards in the religious practice under study, and in (b) reporting afterwards on the role of normativity during the course of the research project.

This reporting on the research project is the final phase for which we present some suggestions. First, we suggest the inclusion of a subsection on (the layers of) normativity in the research design section of the research

report, whether a monograph or a journal article. Traditionally, the research design section follows a structure in which the research participants, research instruments, data gathering, and data analysis are discussed. We also suggest a discussion on the topic of normativity in terms of clarifying the standards or convictions in the religious practice and professional theories of practice that are at stake, the choices in academic theories that are made, and, on the most fundamental level, the metatheoretical foundation that forms the basis under the research design. Second, a critical reflection on normativity in the discussion section should be included when reporting on the research project. Traditionally, a note is made on “a critical evaluation of the chosen research methodology”; our suggestion is to expand this critical evaluation with a reflection on how each of the four layers of normativity, as presented, were operant during the course of the research project. The field notes on the own normative reflections by the researchers, as mentioned, are important for this aim.

## 5 Conclusion

The question “is every practice good?” was the start of our reflection on normativity in our research. We opted for a discursive normativity, and our aim was to describe and apply different aspects of this normativity. The central research questions in this article were as follows: what are the layers of normativity in practical theological youth ministry research, and how can these layers be explicitly or implicitly recognized in practical theological youth ministry studies? The first research question can be answered by distinguishing between four layers of normativity, which are (1) discourse in religious practice, (2) professional theory of practice, (3) academic theory of practice, and (4) metatheoretical foundation of the research project. The second research question was sought to be answered by analyzing three practical theological PhD studies on the youth ministry and religious education from the Research Centre for Youth, Church and Culture. This analysis revealed that explicit normativity could be detected, and implicit normativity could be brought to the surface by using the four layers of normativity as an analytical framework. In line with these conclusions, we recommend focusing on normativity in the design phase in practical theological youth ministry research by reflecting on the research problem, research question(s), and research methodology in the execution phase of the research through awareness of one’s own standards and convictions when participating in, observing, or analyzing youth ministry practices and,



in the reporting phase, by including a subsection on (the layers of) normativity in the research design section and a critical reflection on normativity in the discussion section of the research report.

The four layers of normativity as presented in this article is one way among others to organize layers of normativity in a framework. As an alternative, one might choose for a more nuanced organization with sub-layers (e.g. in layer (1) distinguishing between standards and convictions of participants in religious practices on the one hand and those of the researcher on the other); or one might have missed in our framework, for example, a clear distinct articulation of the aspect of theological doctrinal normativity, which in our framework is not isolated within one layer but, instead, distributed among layers (1), (2) and (3). At the same time, the distinction between these four layers of normativity, however, is not just arbitrary. As said in Section 2, we ended up with this organizing framework only after a thorough group discussion on normativity among research members in our team and only after having tested and sharpened the framework by a critical and detailed examination of three research projects. We believe that the set of four layers of normativity, as presented in this article, is a simple but powerful tool for reflection on normativity by youth ministry researchers directly involved in conducting empirical studies (e.g., PhD students), the researchers supervising these researchers (e.g., in a role as promoters), and scholars who are involved in reviewing manuscripts for publication (e.g., in academic journals).

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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